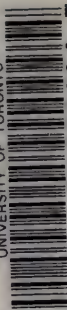


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THE GREAT WHITE ARMY

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THE GREAT WHITE ARMY

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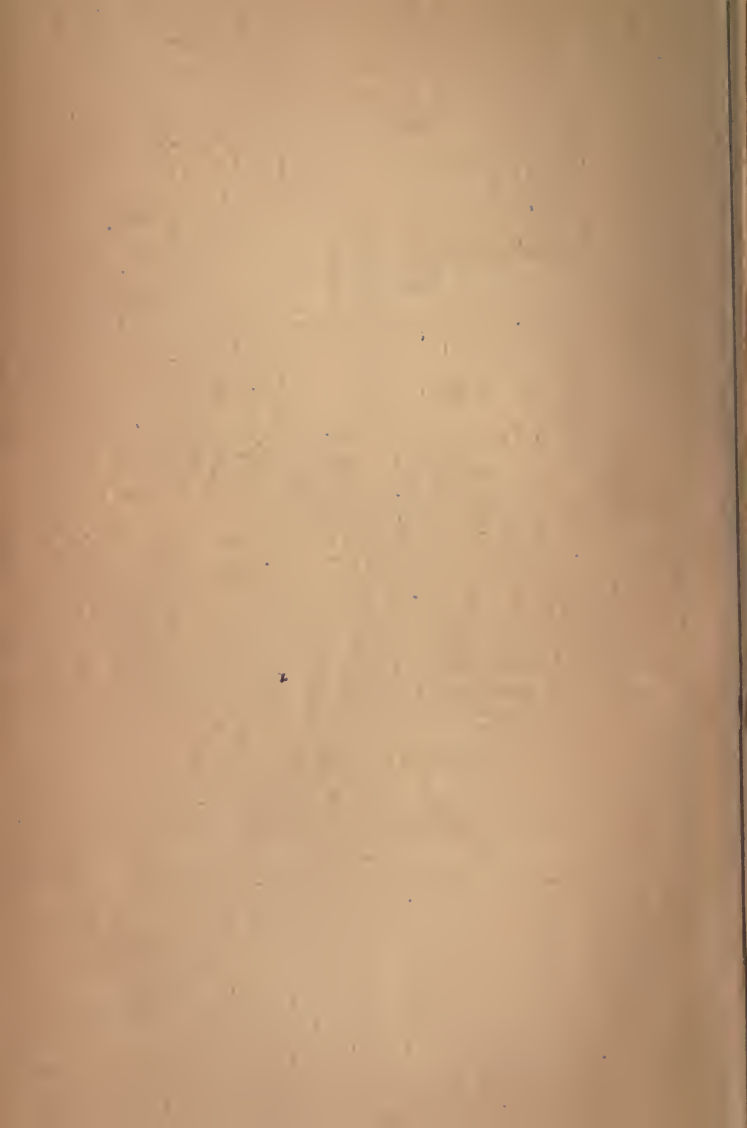


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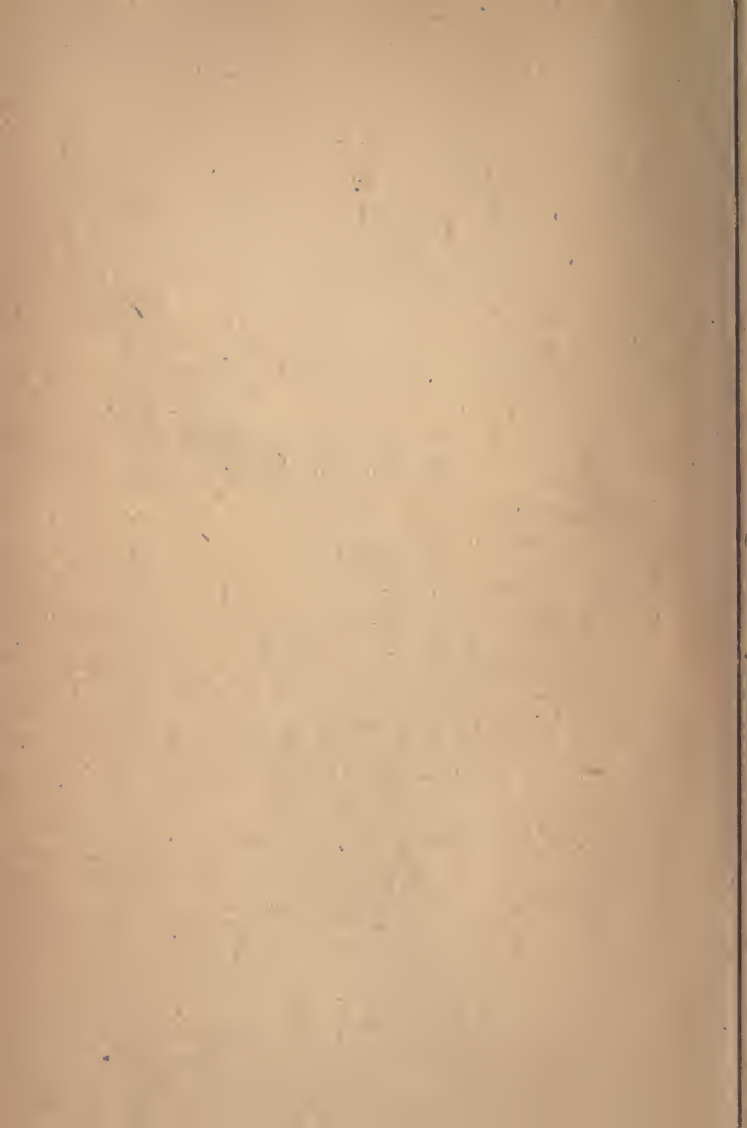
The greatest military tragedy in history is the retreat of Napoleon's Grand Army from Moscow. Napoleon set out to invade Russia in the spring of the year 1812. In the month of June 600,000 men crossed the River Niemen. Of this vast army, but 20,000 "famished, frost-bitten spectres" staggered across the Bridge of Kovno in the month of December.

Many pens have described, with more or less fidelity, the details of this unsurpassable tragedy. The story which we are now about to represent to our readers is that of Surgeon-Major Constant, a veteran who accompanied Napoleon to Moscow, and was one of the survivors who returned ultimately to Paris. Constant had fled from Paris at the beginning of the French Revolution in the year 1792. He lived for a while at Leipsic, where he gave lessons in French and studied medicine. His nephew, Captain Léon de Courcelles, was one of the famous Vélites of the Guard. It is with the exploits of this young and daring soldier that the veteran's narrative is often concerned.



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THE GREAT WHITE ARMY

CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

I

I, JANIL DE CONSTANT, remember very well the moment when we first beheld the glorious city of Moscow, which we had marched twelve thousand leagues to take.

It would have been the fourteenth day of September. The sun shone fiercely upon our splendid cavalcade, and even in the forests, which we now quitted very willingly, there were oases of light like golden lakes in a wonderland.

It was half-past three o'clock when I myself reached the Mont du Salut, a hill from whose summit the traveller first looks down upon the city.

And what a spectacle to see ! What domes and minarets and mighty towers ! What a mingling of East and West, of Oriental beauty

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and the stately splendour of a European capital! You will not wonder that our men drew rein to gaze with awe upon so transcendent a spectacle. This was Mecca truly: Here they would end their labours and here lay their reward.

We thought, with reason surely, that there would be no more talk of war. The Russians had learned their lesson at Borodino, and all that remained for the Russian Tsar to do was to make peace with our Emperor. Meanwhile there would be many days of holiday such as we had not known since we left France. The riches of this city passed the fables, they told us. You will imagine with what feelings the advance posts of the Guard set out to descend the hill and take up their quarters in the governor's palace.

I had hoped to enter Moscow with my nephew Léon, who is one of the Vélites of the Guard. I wished to be near that young man at so critical a moment. Even old soldiers lose their heads when they enter an enemy's city, and what could one expect of the young ones? Léon, however, had ridden on with Major Pavart, of the *chasseurs à cheval*, and so it was with old Sergeant Bourgogne, of the Vélites, that I entered Moscow and began to think of quarters.

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We heard some shots as we went down into the town, and when we came to that broad street which leads to the Place du Gouvernement, a soldier of the line told us that the governor had released the convicts and that they were holding the palace against our outposts. We thought very little of the matter at the time, and were more concerned to admire the magnificence of the street and the beauty of many of its houses. These, it appeared, belonged to the nobility, but we began to perceive that none of the princely owners had remained in Moscow, and that only a few servants occupied these mansions. Many of the latter watched us as we rode by, and at the corner of the great square one of them, a dandy fellow with mincing gait, had the temerity to catch my horse by the bridle and to hold him while he told me that his name was Heriot, and that he had left Paris with the Count of Provence in the year 1790.

"You are a surgeon, are you not?" he went on before I had time to exclaim upon his effrontery. Amazed, I told him that I was.

"Then," said he, "be good enough to come into yonder house and see to one of your own men who is lying there."

I suppose it was a proper thing for the

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fellow to ask me, yet the *naïveté* of it brought a smile to my lips.

“Bon garçon,” said I, “you must have many surgeons of your own in Moscow. Why ask me, who am on my way to the Emperor?”

“Because,” he said, still holding the bridle, “you will not regret your visit, monsieur. This is a rich house: they will know how to pay you for your services.”

There was something mysterious about this remark which excited my curiosity, and turning my horse aside I permitted him to lead it into the stable courtyard. It was to be observed that he slammed the great gate quickly behind us, and bolted it with great bars of iron which would almost have defied artillery. Then he tethered my horse to a pillar and bade me follow him. It was just at the moment when the band of the Fusiliers began to play a lively air and many thousands of our infantry pressed on into the square.

II

WE entered the house itself by a wicket upon the left-hand side, which should have led to the kitchens.

It was here, perhaps, that I thought it

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not a little extraordinary, and it may be somewhat less than prudent, that I, who should have been already at the gates of the palace, had turned aside at the mere nod of this dandy to enter a house of whose people I knew nothing. Nevertheless, it was the case, and I reflected that if one of my own countrymen were indeed in distress, then was the delay not ill-timed.

We were at the foot of a cold stone staircase by this time, and I observed that the lackey began to mount it with some caution. There was no sound in the house, and when presently we emerged in the gallery of a vast hall the place had all the air of a church which has been long closed.

Here for the first time I discovered the purpose for which I had been brought to the place. A man lay dead upon the flags of the gallery, and it was clear that he had died by a bullet from the pistol which was flung down at his side.

Thousands of men had I seen die since we crossed the River Niemen, yet the sight of this mere youth lying dead upon the flags afflicted me strangely. Perchance it was the great cold hall, or the dim light which filtered through its heavy windows, or the silence of that immense house and all the suggestions

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of mystery which attended it. Be it as it may, I had less than my usual resource when I knelt by the young man's side and made that brief examination which quickly convinced me that he was dead. The dandy, meanwhile, stood near by taking prodigious pinches of snuff from a box edged with diamonds. His unconcern was remarkable. I could make nothing of such a picture.

"Who is this youth?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders and took another pinch of the snuff.

"One of your own countrymen, as I say — an artist from Fréjus who is in the service of my lord, the prince."

"How did he die, then?"

The dandy averted his eyes. Then he said:

"I returned from the great square ten minutes ago and found him here. You can see as well as I that he shot himself."

"That is not true," I rejoined, looking at him sternly. "Men do not shoot themselves in the middle of the back!"

He was still unconcerned.

"Very well, then," he retorted; "some one must have shot him." And almost upon the words he turned as white as a sheet.

"Listen," he cried in a loud whisper; "did you not hear them?"

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I listened and certainly heard the sound of voices.

It came through an open door at the far end of the gallery and rose in a sharp crescendo, which seemed to say that men were quarrelling.

"Who is in the house?" I asked the fellow.

"I do not know," he said gravely enough. "There should be no one here but ourselves. Perhaps you will be good enough to see. You are a soldier; it is your business."

I laughed at his impudence, and having looked to the priming of my pistol, I caught him suddenly by the arm and pushed him on ahead of me. Justly or not, it had flashed upon me that this might be a trap. Yet why it should be so or what it had to do with a surgeon-major of the Guards I knew no more than the dead.

"We will go together," said I; and so I pushed him down the corridor.

My presence seemed to give him courage. He entered the room with me, and before a man could have counted three he fell headlong with a great gash in his throat that all the surgeons in the French army could not have stitched up.

This was a memorable scene, but I was

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to witness many a one like it in those days of rapine and of pillage to come.

We had entered a lofty room, the furniture of which would not have been out of place in the Emperor's palace at Paris. Most of it, indeed, was French, and some of the cabinets were such as you may see to this day both in the Tuileries and at Fontainebleau. So much I observed at a glance, but infinitely of more import at the moment was the tenants of the room. Three greater ruffians I have never seen in any city of Europe; neither men so dirty and ill-kempt nor so ferocious in their mien. All wore ragged sheepskins and had their legs bare at the knee. They were armed with knives and bludgeons, and two of them carried torches in their hands. Instantly I saw that these were three of the convicts whom the governor had released. They had come to sack the house, and they would have killed any who opposed them as a butcher kills a sheep. But for the dead man at my feet, I could have laughed aloud at their predicament when they suddenly realised that a soldier and not a civilian must now be dealt with. It was just as though their valour went ebbing away in a torrent.

I struck the first man down with the

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butt end of my pistol, and, fearing the effect of a shot, drew my sword and made for the others who held the torches. They fled headlong, slamming the heavy door at the far end of the room behind them—and there was I alone with the dead, and the house had fallen again to the silence of a tomb.

III

I STOOPED over the man I had struck down, and found him breathing stertorously but still alive. The lackey, however, was quite dead, and his blood had made a great pool upon the rich Eastern carpet of the salon.

My first impulse was to go to the windows and open the heavy shutters; and when this was done I found myself looking out upon a pretty garden in the Italian fashion. It was surrounded by high walls on three sides, and seemed as void of humanity as the house. The salon itself stood at a considerable height from the ground, and although there was a wide balcony before the windows, I perceived no possible means of escape thereby.

This will tell you that I now had a considerable apprehension both of the deserted

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house and of the adventure which had befallen me. Not only did I blame my own folly for listening to the servant in the first instance—that was bad enough—but upon it there came a desire to return to my comrades, which was almost an obsession. There I stood upon the balcony listening to the rolling of the drums and the blare of the bugles, and yet I might have been a thousand leagues from friends and comrades. Moreover, it was evident that I had not seen the last of the assassins, and that they would return.

Such was the situation at a moment when I realised that escape by the balcony was impossible. Returning to the room, its beauty and riches stood fully revealed by the warm sunlight, and they recalled to me the tales of Moscow's wealth which we had heard directly we entered Russia. The Grand Army I said, would be well occupied for many days to come in an employment it had always found congenial. Vases of the rarest porcelain, statues from Italy, pictures and furniture from my own France, gems in gold and stones most precious were the common ornaments of this magnificent apartment. Here and there an empty cabinet seemed to say that some attempt had been made already to remove

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these treasures, and that the entry of our troops had disturbed the robbers. What remained, however, would have been riches to a prince, and it would have been possible for me to have put a fortune into my wallet that very hour.

Already it seemed to me that I should have a difficulty in finding my way out of the house. The idea had been in my mind when I stood upon the balcony and contemplated the solitude and the security of the garden below. There I had listened to the rolling music of the bands, the blare of bugles, and the tramping of many thousands of exulting soldiers; but all sounds were lost when I returned to the great hall and stood alone with the dead.

Who was this youth to whom I had been called?

I bent over him and discovered such a face as one might find in the picture of an Italian master. The lad would have been about one and twenty, and no woman's hair could have been finer than his. Such a skin I had rarely seen; the face might have been chiselled from the purest marble; the eyes were open and blue as the sea by which I imagined this young fellow had lived. There was firmness in the chin, and a contour of

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neck and shoulders which even a physician could admire.

His clothes, I observed, were well chosen and made of him a man of some taste. He wore breeches of black velvet and a shirt of the finest cambric, open at the neck. His shoes had jewelled buckles, and his stockings were of silk. Who, then, was the lad, and why had the lackey killed him? That was a question I meant to answer when I had some of my comrades with me. It remained to escape from this house of mystery as quickly as might be.

I passed down the staircase and came to an ante-room with a vast door at the end of it. It was heavily bolted, and the keys of it were gone. So much I had expected, and yet it seemed that where the assassins had gone there might I follow. Ridiculous to be a prisoner of a house from within, and of such a house, when there must be half a dozen doors that gave upon the streets about it. And yet I could find none of them that was not locked and barred as the chief door I have named, while every window upon the ground floor might have been that of a prison.

Vainly I went from place to place—here by corridors that were as dark as night, there into rooms where the lightest sounds gave

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an echo as of thunder, back again to the great hall I had left—and always with the fear of the assassins upon me and the irony of my condition unconcealed. Good God! That I had shut myself in such a trap! A thousand times I cursed the builder of such a house and all his works. The night, I said, would find me alone in a tomb of marble.

I shall not weary you by a recital of all that befell in the hours of daylight that remained. I had a horrid fear of the dark, and when at length it overtook me I returned to the salon, and, having covered the dead men with the rugs lying about, went thence to the balcony and so watched the night come down.

Consider my situation—so near and yet so far from all that was taking place in this fallen city.

Above me the great bowl of the sky glowed with the lights of many a bivouac in square or market. It was as though the whole city trembled beneath the footsteps of the thousands who now trampled down her ancient glory and cast her banners to the earth. The blare of bands was to be heard everywhere; the murmur of voices rose and fell like the angry surf that beats upon a shore. Cries of "Vive l'Empereur!" rent the air from time

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to time, and to them were added the fierce shouting of the rabble or the frenzied screams of those who fled before the glittering bayonets of this mighty host. And to crown all, as though mockingly, there rang out the music of those unsurpassable bells—the bells of Moscow, of which all the world has heard.

These were the sights and sounds which came to me as I stood upon that balcony and laughed grimly at my situation. But a stone's throw away, said I, there would be merry fellows enough to call me by my name and lead me to my comrades.

Janil de Constant, I flattered myself, was as well known as any man in all the Guard, old or young. Never did his Majesty pass me but I had a warm word from him or that little pinch upon the ear which denoted his favour.

My art was considerable, as all the world knows.

I had been a professor in the University of Paris until this fever of war fell upon me, and I set out to discover its realities for myself. What skill could do for suffering men, I had done these many months, and yet here was I as far from it all as though a ship had carried me to the Indies and the desolation of the ocean lay all about me.

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These, I say, were my thoughts, and the night—that wonderful night of summer—did nothing to better them. Perchance I should have spent it there upon the balcony but for that which I had expected—the return of the assassins to the spoils from which they had been scared. It could not have befallen otherwise. The time, I suppose, would have been about ten of the clock. They entered the garden below me, and I heard their footsteps upon the grass. But now there were many of them, and even from the balcony it was apparent to me that all were armed.

IV

I RETURNED to the room, and, crossing it swiftly, had my hand already upon the key of the door when a new sound arrested me.

The sound proceeded from the gallery of the great staircase. I heard a key turned and a door creak upon its hinges. A moment later the faint light of a candle illumined the staircase, and the figure of a woman appeared.

It was all very sudden. But the half of a minute, I suppose, elapsed between the first sound of the key and the appearance of the beautiful creature who now stood in the

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gallery; yet to me it seemed an age of waiting. There I stood motionless, watching that vision which the candle revealed—the vision of the sleeper awakened, and a woman's cloak thrown about her shoulders.

“Good God!” I cried, “the dead have come to life!” Beyond all doubt this must be the sister of the murdered man.

“Mademoiselle,” I said, taking a step forward. And at that she cried out in terror and let the candle drop. Instantly I strode to her side and caught both her hands, for it was evident she was swooning.

“Mademoiselle,” I repeated, “I am a Frenchman, and came to this house to help your brother. Help me in your turn. There are men in the garden, and they are coming in—we must be quick, mademoiselle.”

She shivered a little in my arms and then pressed forward towards me.

“I am Valerie,” she murmured in a low voice, as though I would recognise the name. “My brother is dead; François the steward killed him. Oh, take me away—take me from this place.”

I told her that I would do so, that my only desire was to escape from the house if I could.

“But, mademoiselle,” said I, “every door

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is locked. I cannot find the way, and the brigands are returning. We have no time to lose."

The tidings appeared to rouse her. She passed her hand across her forehead and, staggering forward a little way, stood very still as though in thought.

I shall never forget that picture of her as the moonbeams came down from the dome above, and she stood there in a robe of white and silver. A more beautiful thing I have never seen upon God's earth. The story of her brother's death appeared no longer a mystery.

"My God!" she cried, "they are in the house!"

We bent over the balustrade together and listened to the sounds. There was a crashing as of woodwork, and then the hum of voices. Instantly upon that there came the heavy trampling of feet. Those who entered the house were not afraid—they were even laughing as they came.

"What shall we do?" she cried.
"What shall we do?"

I caught her hand and dragged her back from the railing.

"There must be some room which will hide us," said I. "You know the way. Think, child; is there no such place?"

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She did not answer me, but turned and led the way up the narrow flight of stairs by which she had appeared. Here was her bedroom.

We passed through it without delay and entered an oratory which lay at the head of a second flight of stairs immediately beyond. Here she shut a heavy door of oak and bolted it. The only light in the room flickered from a golden lamp before the altar, and as far as I could see there was no way out other than the door by which we had come in.

Now, this chapel was built in one of the eastern turrets of the house. I came to learn later that the owner of the place was Prince Boris, a man of some culture and of European notoriety, and that, while he was himself an orthodox Greek, he had permitted this use of a secret chapel to the young Frenchwoman who now knelt before its altar.

Wonderfully decorated in gold and silver, with rare pictures upon its walls and superb gems in the crucifixes above the tabernacle, the whole bore witness to a man of Catholic sympathies and abundant wealth. At any other time, no doubt, I would have made much of this hidden chapel and of its treasures; but the hour was not propitious, and, glad of its momentous security, I turned to the girl

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and would have questioned her. She, however, was already at her prayers, nor did she seem to hear me when I addressed her. A second question merely caused her to turn her head and cry, "Hush! they will hear us!" And so she went on praying—I doubt not for her dead brother's soul—while I paced up and down in as great a state of anger and of self-reproach as I had ever been in all my life.

What a situation for a surgeon-major of the Guards—to be locked up here in this puny chapel with a houseful of assassins below, and my own regiment not a stone's throw from the gate! And yet that was the truth of it, and anon I heard some of the robbers come leaping up the stairs, and presently they began to beat upon the door of the chapel, and I knew that they carried axes in their hands.

V

THE sounds were deep and ominous, and might well have quelled a stronger spirit. The girl herself turned her head at the first blow, and then, staggering to her feet, she caught me by the arm and whispered her fears in my ear.

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“They will beat it down,” she said, indicating the door.

I answered that I thought it quite possible.

“Why do your soldiers let them?” she asked me; and upon that she said, “Why did you come here alone?”

I told her that the steward, for such I supposed the lackey to be, had brought me to the place; and so much she understood readily enough.

“He was insolent to me,” she exclaimed. “My brother struck him. He carried a pistol, but we did not know it. God help me, what I have suffered this day! And now this——” And again she indicated the peril beyond the door.

Yet with it all her courage was not lacking. She no longer wept now that danger threatened us, and presently she pointed to the gilded dome above, and said that it could be reached from the little gallery behind the altar.

“Then,” said I, “let us see what we can do.” And, taking her hand, we went up to the gallery together; and there sure enough in the angle was a Gothic window large enough for a man to pass through. When I opened it I saw a narrow gallery at the very summit of the cupola, and to this I helped her imme-

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diately. The height was considerable and the parapet but trifling. She stood there by my side without flinching, and when we had closed the window it seemed as though the peril were now far distant.

“I could hold this place against a regiment,” said I, drawing my sword and indicating the narrow window.

She understood as much, and, nodding her head, she gazed out over Moscow, as though some help were to be expected from the turbid streets which the night now revealed to us.

Surely this was a wonderful hour! The gallery of the cupola stood some eighty feet above the pavement of the courtyard below. We looked out over the stables of the prince's house to the great gate by which I had entered and the Place du Gouvernement where the lackey had accosted me. It must have been nearly midnight, and yet Moscow was as wide awake as ever she had been in her history. I saw thousands of my own countrymen marching with light steps to the bivouacs prepared for them. Great fires had been kindled in every open space. There were lanterns swinging and bugles blaring. Bayonets shimmered in the crimson light, bells rang joyously, the triumphant war songs of the victors were unceasing. And all this

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amid a clamour, a restless going to and fro, a fevered movement of awakened people that capitulation alone could provoke. The Grand Army had reached its goal, and here was the end of its labours. So I doubt not the thousands thought as they pressed on towards the Kremlin and soldiers began to enter every house and demand the fruits of their labours.

I have told you that the beautiful young Frenchwoman had hardly spoken to me hitherto, but here at this dizzy height she began for the first time, I think, to realise that I was a friend and not a foe, and her tongue was loosened. I have never seen greater dignity in a woman nor one whose self-possession was so remarkable under such tragic circumstances. She indicated the busy street below and asked me to which of those regiments I belonged.

I told her at once that I was a surgeon-major of the Vélites, and should be now in the governor's palace with the Emperor.

"Then," she said, "your friends will come to look for you, will they not?"

I told her that it was not impossible.

"But, mademoiselle," said I, "they will not imagine that I have become a bird."

She liked the humour of it and smiled very sweetly.

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"Oh," she said, closing her eyes and shuddering, "what a day it has been! Prince Boris left yesterday to rejoin the army. My brother and I were to have followed him to Nishni this afternoon. Then the steward said that he could not be left alone, for the convicts were out and were robbing the houses. The governor released them at noon to-day. They have been pillaging all Moscow, and your friends will find little when they come."

I was greatly interested in this, for some such story had reached us even before we entered the city.

The desperate resolve to deliver Moscow to the evil element in its population had been taken by its rulers some days previously to the arrival of the army, but neither the Emperor nor his staff had been greatly moved by it. The cavalry would soon make short work of these fellows in the open, while we trusted to the predatory instincts of the rank and file to deal with such scum in the houses.

I was about to tell her as much when a movement of the window behind us caused me to turn round, and to discover a shaggy head protruding therefrom. Without a thought, I fired my pistol point blank at it, and I shall always say that this was as unlucky a stroke as ever I made. The flash and the

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report on that high tower drew the attention of the passers-by in the street without, and presently some infantry who were passing began to fire on the tower, and the bullets rained thick around us. There was nothing for it but to plump down beneath the balustrade and so wait until their humour was done. And so we sat, the girl wide-eyed and silent, myself with drawn sword to thrust at any face which should be shown at the window above us.

“Janil,” said I to myself, “this will be a pretty tale for the regiment to-morrow.” Had you pressed me, I would have confessed a doubt that that to-morrow would ever be.

An hour passed, I suppose, and still found us in the same position. There were no longer any bullets from the street, and anon, when I stood up and looked again over the great gate of the palace, whom should I see but my own nephew Léon riding up and down upon his famous white horse and evidently searching for his old uncle who had played so scurvy a trick upon him.

VI

Now this was a splendid sight; and, waving my sword and crying with all my lungs, I

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strove in vain to attract his attention. As for the girl at my side, she watched me in some astonishment. Presently, seeing what I was after, she asked me if it were not the young soldier on the white horse in whom I was interested.

“Mademoiselle,” said I, “it is Léon, my nephew. If I can make myself known to him, I will warrant that he will be inside this house before you can count ten. A fine soldier, mademoiselle; I am very proud of him.”

She nodded her head and looked at the boy with a new interest. There was such a great bivouac fire at the corner of the square that you could see him almost as if he were upon the stage of a theatre, and surely a handsomer man did not ride with the Grand Army. Well I knew what this pretty woman would think of him, and I watched her with an old man's interest.

“He does not see you,” she remarked presently.

It was all too true.

“But he will not abandon me,” I retorted; and, turning at the same moment, I struck with the butt of my pistol at a second face which showed itself at the window. The fellow withdrew with a curse that plainly

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meant mischief. I could hear other voices in the room, and by and by a stranger sound, and the smell of fire upon it.

“ Good God ! ” I said, “ they are burning the chapel ! ”

At that she uttered a low cry, the first of fear that I had heard escape her lips.

I opened the window and looked down into the chapel. There were but two men there, and one was firing the curtains of the altar. So little did he fear interruption that I leaped down on him while his torch was still upraised, and, running him through with my sword, I pulled the burning curtain upon him and stamped the fire out upon his body. The other assassin watched me with eyes grown wide with fear. He had a torch in his hand, but he stood there as though spell-bound, and when I made at him he fell head-long upon the staircase, and man and fire went rolling over and over together.

This did not alarm me, for the stairs were all stone, and there was nothing that could be kindled. Following the fellow through the bedroom, I came again upon the great staircase, and there looked down upon as strange a spectacle as I shall ever see in all my years. It was as though all the rabble of Moscow had come together in that mag-

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nificent hall—giant Tartars, low-caste assassins from the Indies, black-browed Slavs, patriarchs with long beards and youths with none—all were filling their sacks with the spoils of the prince's house and carrying them, when full, to the garden beyond. Animals in a den never fought more fiercely than some of these rogues when their lusts had clashed. Nor might a man have found a fiercer company in all the foul havens of the East.

For myself, I watched them aghast, knowing that it were death to be discovered where I stood. So eager, however, were they that none saw me, and the pillage and the riot were still at their height when one amongst them cried "Fire!" and in an instant every man sprang to attention, and the roar of a great conflagration burst upon their astonished ears.

VII

THE palace had been fired; there could be no doubt about it.

Volumes of smoke poured into the hall and went floating to the ceiling in dense and looming clouds. The marble reflected a ruddy light as of flames vomited from a fiery pit.

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There was a crackling of wood, a rending of glass, and upon that the oaths and curses of the assassins below. Now truly were they hoist of their own petard. The palace had been fired while their plunder was yet unpacked, and they roared and barked around it like wolves robbed of their prey.

I say that we were all taken unawares, and that is true enough. For myself, I stood there listening to the roar of the flames, and watching the mad, frenzied struggles of the scum below, and with no more idea of how to get out of the place than the veriest child might have had. None but a madman would have attempted to fight his way through the raving mob of brigands who grovelled about the doors in seeming impotence, as though their shaking hands could not unlock the bars which imprisoned them. Yet passed they must be if I and the child with me were not to perish in the flames.

So much could not be hidden from either of us. We beheld them wrangling still upon their plunder while the flames were all about them, and those who did run from the hall returned immediately to warn their friends in a tongue which had no meaning for me. From this time they became as demons possessed. It was a terrible thing to see them

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running round and round like dogs driven by a whip, to hear the clash of their knives, and the shrieks of those who fell. Nor could I wonder that my little companion's courage deserted her at last and that a loud cry of fear escaped her.

"Oh, come," she cried, "come from this dreadful place." And, so saying, she caught me almost savagely by the arm and led me from the gallery. Whither she would take me, I knew not at all. Her eyes were alight with the fear which animated her. She stretched out her arms as though to feel her way in the gathering smoke which threatened us. I could see already that she had little hope of the venture.

We crossed a corridor and entered a lofty room which I took to be the library of the palace. Farther on there was an antechamber, whose door was locked and barred as the others had been in the room below. Upon this she beat furiously as though someone beyond could hear us and would open. Solid as a gate of iron, twenty men could not have forced it. I saw already that our errand was vain, and I was about to lead her away when what should happen but that the door was opened from within, and a Russian soldier stood before me. "Nicholas!"

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cried mademoiselle ; and instantly the child was in the arms of a Russian, who kissed her as a lover might have done.

Now, this man was an officer who wore the white uniform and the black cuirass of Prince Boris's famous regiment. I took him for the prince's son, and there I was not wrong, as I learned at a subsequent date.

And it needed no clever eye to tell me how things stood between the girl and himself, and there was a smile on my lips while I watched them and then looked over his shoulder into the room beyond, full of his fellows and ablaze with the glitter of uniforms.

The presence of these men needed little explanation. I perceived that there had been a secret conclave in the palace, and I understood in an instant what my own presence must mean. It was no coward's alarm. There were half a dozen of them atop of me before I could lift a hand to save myself. In vain the girl pleaded with them. They discovered immediately that the palace was on fire, and, mad with rage and fury, they fell upon me like wild beasts. The French had done this thing, they cried ; then let the Frenchmen pay the price. I knew now that they meant to kill me. Their very gestures would have

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told me as much. "A spy!" they shouted—to Janil de Constant!

Well, there it was, and that is the simple truth of the story.

I remember that they pushed me headlong from the room, then down a steep flight of stairs, and so to a garden at the foot of it. There one of them cried for a sergeant to come to him. After that my memory is chiefly of the glitter of bayonets and of a man who called to his fellow to bind my hands with cord. It came to me as in a dream that they were about to shoot me, and that this was the hour of my death. I recollect that I was thrust up against a rough stone wall, and that the sergeant asked me a question in Russian of which I could make nothing.

From the room there now came the loud shouts of the officers, who had discovered that the palace was on fire, and were leading some of the troopers to attack the flames. Their voices and that of the sergeant mingled oddly in my ears; but presently I began to perceive that the man wished to bandage my eyes, and as this promised an instant of grace, I assented willingly. To say that I was afraid is to give but a child's idea of the circumstances. It had all come upon me so

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swiftly—the discovery of the fire and of the assassins, the passing of hope and the coming of despair, that this new turn found my wits paralysed and all resources gone from me. In my head there were buzzing sounds as of a man stricken suddenly by sickness. I thought of nothing except of the wall against which I stood, of the man who bandaged my eyes and of the bayonets which had glittered in the ruddy glow of flames. That I should be dead when ten seconds were counted I could not believe, and then as swiftly the truth must be heard. “You are about to die,” said the secret voice in my ear. “You will never see the day. This is night; you will sleep.”

An intolerable interval of silence followed upon this. I heard the shuffling of feet and the sound of voices as though from the far distance. Men were speaking in whispers, and these whispers grew in volume until they were like a hoarse murmur of winds about me. I was tempted to cry, “Fire, for God’s sake!” and yet I could not utter the words. Indeed, a faintness had come upon me, and I swayed to and fro until the volley rang out with a crash of thunder and lights danced fantastically before my eyes. Then I think that I must have fallen prone upon the grass.

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If this were death, it had come without pain, and men had laughed because it came. God ! Was there ever such laughter heard by a man so situated ? Peal upon peal of it—and a woman's laughter !

Someone loosed the bands which held my hands, and another forced a little brandy between my clenched lips. I raised myself up, shivering as though with an ague.

All about me it was as light and bright as though the sun had risen. The great palace flamed with a thunder of sounds and a crash of beams most dreadful to hear. But otherwise the scene was as I had known it before they bandaged me, save that Valerie stood at the stairs' head swaying in an outburst of mad laughter which fear and pity had provoked, while my nephew Léon watched her as she laughed. A moment later and a man appeared and caught her in his arms. It was the Russian, Prince Nicholas, who passed down the steps and was gone from the garden before any man could draw upon him.

VIII

LÉON told me that he thought I must be in the house all the while, but that he had

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hesitated to break in until the assassins had fired it. When he found me, I stood alone by the wall, blinded and helpless, but not a Russian to be seen. Who could wonder when the whole garden was full of French bayonets.

I left the house with him and we went together to the governor's palace. None knew what had become of my horse, nor did I care overmuch. The Place du Gouvernement itself was alive with our soldiers called to put out the fire if they could. By these we went quickly, Léon asking me a hundred questions which I could not answer yet.

"There was a woman there," said I.

He interrupted me with a laugh.

"You think that I did not see her!" he asked.

It being Léon, I thought no such thing.

"We will hunt her out to-morrow," said he, and then we turned about and together watched the burning palace.

"A welcome to Moscow!" he cried sardonically.

Ah, if we had known how this welcome was to be repeated in the days to come!

CHAPTER II

THE GUILLOTINE

I

My nephew, Léon, had sworn to seek out the beautiful young Frenchwoman, Valerie, whom we had last seen in the gardens of the burning house; but many days elapsed before that came to be, as you shall presently learn.

In the first place, there was far too much to do in Moscow for the army to think about women at all.

We had arrived at the end of our journey, and the twelve hundred leagues of marching had tired the strongest of us. Now we would rest at the heart of Russia, while the Emperor dictated peace to the Tsar and his army made good its losses. We never so much as dreamed that we had pursued a phantom, and that it would lead the Grand Army to its destruction.

So you must behold us for many days in Moscow enjoying the fruits of our labours and yet finding plenty of work to do. I have told you already that the Guards were quar-

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tered in the Palace of the Kremlin, whither the Emperor had repaired ; and there I took up my residence with my nephew Léon, and was occupied for some days in attending to the sick who had accompanied us on our long journey from Smolensk. Though many rumours came to me of the strange things that were happening in the city beyond the palace, I paid little heed to them. His Majesty the Emperor had set out to conquer Russia, and here he was at the heart of their empire. What remained, then, but to sign a splendid peace and to return in triumph to Paris ?

This is how things should have been, yet how different they were !

We had been prepared to find the Russian nobles fled from Moscow, but the absolute desertion of the city by its people astonished us beyond compare.

Often would I go forth into these magnificent streets, to find the great houses all shut up, their gardens a solitude, the cafés closed, and none but our own soldiers abroad.

Deserted houses everywhere ! The hotels shut up and boarded against the stranger. All the shops denuded of their goods and shuttered and barred as though they were prisons.

Such Russians as we met had the most revolting aspect and were clad in the coarsest

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sheepskins. We knew that the best of them were convicts who had been released by the governor on our advent, and now they skulked like wolves to do us a mischief in every alley or by-street which sheltered them.

For the rest, Moscow might have been a mausoleum. We danced to the music of our own voices; the cheers that were raised were the cheers from French throats which heralded only a hollow victory.

The plunder that we seized came to our hands undisputed. No man contended with us save the brigands, and they were like jackals, whose howls were chiefly heard by night.

I have often wondered at the sang-froid with which all this was received at headquarters. None of the staff appeared aware of the perils of our situation, nor did the fact that we were already running short of provisions alarm our leaders. Many things we had in abundance, and they should have provoked our irony. It was ridiculous to see whole companies of the Guard making merry over casks of French liqueur or wallowing like schoolgirls in boxes of sweetmeats. Yet such was the case, and nothing but the actual riches of the city blinded the rank and file to the truth.

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Oh, what days of plunder they were, and how our good fellows revelled in them !

A man had but to sally forth with an axe in his hand to reach the riches of a Croesus. I have seen the veriest Gascons so laden with furs and jewels and the wealth of nobles that they themselves, could they have conveyed their burdens to Paris, might never have had an anxiety about their bread to the end of their days. It was the commonest thing to discover carts and wagons in Moscow piled high with the treasures of centuries and led uncontested to the camps of an enemy which had found the gates open and the ramparts undefended. Even the Imperial edict against pillage and rapine was useless to prevent this spoliation. The men had suffered much to reach the Holy City, and His Majesty the Emperor was wise enough to reward them according to their hopes.

Here I must tell you that the common troopers were by no means the only offenders in this respect. There was not an officer in or out of the Guards who did not claim his share of the plunder, while he shut his eyes to the doings of those under him. If I myself forbore to take a hand in this profitable amusement, it was because my burdens were heavy and owed not a little to the state

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of Moscow even in the early days of our occupation.

Then, as afterwards, fire was our almost daily enemy. One day it would be in the bazaars ; the next in the poorest quarters of the city ; again in the houses of the rich, which our troopers had pillaged. We were told the convicts fired the buildings by the governor's orders. We could not believe it, and yet we hunted the rascals down as though they were vermin.

I have often wondered what His Majesty the Emperor would have done had he known the true state of affairs in Moscow. He did not know them, however, and he was still anxious to propitiate those whom he believed to be its people. Every day we heard the story of the peace which was to be signed, and of the profit which was to come to our arms thereby ; and every day we who served were abroad in street or alley wrestling with the flames and smoke of the burning houses, or hanging and shooting the incendiaries who had become the enemy.

Little wonder that my nephew Léon had no time for love-making. Often would I ask him if he had heard of or seen the beautiful Valerie again. The rascal pretended that he had forgotten her very existence, and yet I

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knew in my heart that he had remembered her. It was no surprise to me when, at the end of the third week, I heard from his servant, Gascogne, that he had received a letter from Valerie herself, and that it had contained an invitation to dinner in a house beyond the suburbs of the city. When I charged Léon with it he shook his head and smiled in his boyish way.

“Oh, mon oncle,” he protested, “what time have I for anything like that?”

I rejoined that a man has always time for a pretty woman, and at that he laughed loudly.

“She asked me to dinner,” says he, “but, of course, I shall not go. Why, my dear uncle, it would be very dangerous to do so. Do you not know that her friend is Prince Nicholas, who has sworn a vendetta against every Frenchman in Moscow? I should be a fool to do anything of the kind.”

I agreed that he would be, and really I was not a little astonished at his common sense.

Captains of the Guard are rarely prudent where a pretty face is concerned, and Valerie St. Antoine was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in all my life. It was amazing to me that Léon should have learned so much wisdom in so short a space of time, and I plumed myself upon his sagacity. Oh,

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how easily do we old fogeys deceive ourselves ! Not three days had elapsed before I learned that he had written to the lady, and on the fourth I heard with some regret that he had gone to dine with her.

II

Now, I do not know why it was, but this affair had caused me much uneasiness from the beginning, and when I heard, upon the evening of September 28, that my nephew had left the palace and gone to dine with Valerie, a disquietude quite beyond ordinary attended the discovery.

Possibly Léon's own words had something to do with it. He had said that such an invitation might be a trap, and although the opinion was expressed as a joke, there remained a doubt in my own mind which no mere assurance could remove.

Remember the circumstances. We had discovered already that Valerie St. Antoine was the friend, and more than the friend, of a man who had sworn to exterminate the French in Moscow. The reality of the tie which bound them had been made apparent to me when I was with her in Prince Boris's house, and I

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could conceive no honest circumstance which would justify the invitation to my nephew Léon. When I questioned his servant, Gascogne, that good fellow seemed no less uneasy than I myself.

“There have been five officers from this regiment lost in Moscow this very week,” said he. “I warned Captain Léon, but he would not listen to me. A woman. Faugh! It is the usual story, major. They all have a rendezvous, and none of them returns. Why did not the captain consult you? I told him that it was a trick, and he answered me by putting on his best uniform and calling a droshky. Major, we shall be lucky if we see him again.”

I took no such view as this, and yet a certain foreboding of ill was not lightly to be put aside.

Léon had done as so many others in his regiment, and some of those had never returned to the palace. It might even be that the girl Valerie had not written the letter at all; and this latter thought was so disquieting that I sent Gascogne out to seek the driver of the droshky and to bring the fellow to the palace. When he came, a few sharp words soon had the truth from him.

“My good fellow,” said I, “you will drive

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me immediately to the house to which you have just taken my nephew, Captain de Courcelles. If you play any trick upon me I will have you hanged at the gate of the Kremlin. Now, choose for yourself."

This was no idle threat, nor was it without its effect. The man fell into a frenzy of fear, while great drops of sweat stood upon his forehead, and he protested his innocence before God and the saints.

"Then let him put it to the proof," said I to the interpreter, "and bring his droshky here immediately."

Ten minutes later we were passing out of the western gate, and Sergeant Bardot, of the Fusiliers, was at my side. They called him "the antelope" in the regiment, and there was no nimbler fellow in all the Guards.

"Captain Léon has gone to meet a woman," said I. "It may be a trap, and, if so, we must get him out of it. I can count upon your discretion, sergeant?"

He answered that he was altogether at my service, and I could see that the prospect of an adventure pleased him greatly.

"They are devils, these Russians," said he, "and it is just as well that we should go. I trust we shall be in good time, major. The regiment could not afford to lose Captain

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Léon. There is no better officer in the Guards."

I agreed with that. There was no better officer in the Guards. If he were in any danger we must save him. So many had fallen in Moscow at a woman's nod that I ceased to ask myself what part curiosity played in this adventure.

Sufficient that Léon had gone to dine with Nicholas, the Russian, who had sworn a vendetta against every French officer in the city.

III

It was nine o'clock when we left the barracks, and half an hour later when the droshky rolled out upon the great north road to Petersburg.

So hot was it that hundreds of our fellows were sleeping in the open parks which abound on the border of the city, and their bivouac fires glowed beneath the pines and showed many a scene of tipsy revelry. With them were some of those women who cling to the skirts of an army as flies to a pasty, and these hussies capered about the fires in song and dance, while the sorriest music set them whooping like wild men at a fair. We paid little attention to them, but thought rather of

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the wide road ahead of us and of our unknown destination.

Now, this was a hazardous journey, as any man who was with me in Moscow will bear witness.

It is true that the city and surrounding country were wholly in our power; but we knew very well that bands of wild Cossacks ravaged the neighbourhood and were ready enough to butcher any Frenchman they could find. The road itself lay chiefly through pine woods, which afforded good harbourage to these brigands, and more than once I thought that I saw a horseman watching us as we went. When I mentioned as much to the sergeant he pooh-poohed it, as such a man would, declaring that our own patrols were in the district and would deal with such scum.

“We are not worth powder and shot,” he said with a laugh, “and, in any case, we shall have the satisfaction of shooting the driver if anything happens to us.”

This seemed to afford him some consolation. I noticed that he took out his pistol and primed it, as though very ready to begin if the miserable coachman afforded him any pretext. We, however, drove on without event, and when we had covered perhaps a couple of leagues the driver turned suddenly down a

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grassy path through the wood and presently declared that we had reached our destination.

It was not very dark here, and for the moment I thought that the fellow had played a trick upon us.

We appeared to have reached a veritable forest, great chestnut trees taking the place of the pines and a wide pool shining under the moon's rays where the roadway ended. Presently, however, I discerned the glimmer of a lamp amidst a copse upon the right-hand side, and the droshky driver indicated with his whip that it was the house which Captain Léon had visited.

An uglier place could not be imagined. The dark groves of stupendous trees, the silent pool, the remote situation of the habitation, affected me strangely. I was convinced by this time that my nephew had fallen into a trap, and that we should be lucky men if we found him alive. Even the imperturbable Bardot could not put a good face upon it. He showed his pistol to the coachman and commanded him to stay where he was. Then he followed me down the grove towards the house.

I have told you that it was hidden in the trees; but this will give you but a poor idea of its situation. We saw upon nearer approach that the pool or lake was fed by a winding

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river, upon an island of which the house was built, so that it was entirely surrounded by water, which a mediæval drawbridge spanned.

The building itself had all the air of the keep of an ancient castle, being no more than a great round tower built upon the island, with a miserable outhouse at its foot and a barn-like structure to the south, which served, I doubt not, for a stable. Save for a glimmer of light which showed through a considerable loophole above the drawbridge, there was no evidence of occupation either above or below. The place seemed as silent as the grave; our own footsteps upon the sward were a heavy sound upon the silence of that summer's night.

To be sure, we approached very cautiously. We must have been at least fifty paces from the water's edge when Bardot went down flat upon his stomach and began to crawl towards the river.

"If I whistle," he said, "come to me."

I answered that I would; and after an interminable interval of waiting I heard his signal. When I came up to his side he pointed to the figure of a man who stood sentry beyond the bridge.

"Look," he said. "The fellow is drunk. They are all drunk in this cursed country. If

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we sounded the réveill^é he would not hear us. We must go over and tell him so. You can swim, of course ? ”

I shook my head, for the truth was I could not swim a stroke. When I discovered that he was in a like predicament, the tragic irony of our position began to be realised for the first time. There we were, fifty paces from the door, behind which poor Léon might already be in jeopardy. I knew now that the girl Valerie had not written the letter, and this was just the trap I had supposed it to be. Yet there we stood, as helpless as any child from a woodlander's hut. Even Bardot could make nothing of it.

“ If I had known ! ” he would say, just as though it had been in my power to tell him. Such folly angered me. I got up regardless of the risk of discovery, and began to make my way back to the carriage. The man should gallop back to Moscow, said I, and we would return within the hour with a troop of cavalry, and this time we would bring our own bridge.

This was in my mind, though the despair of it needs no apology.

“ A thousand to one,” I argued, “ that Léon will not be alive when we return ; and yet we might avenge him ! ”

A fierce desire to beat down the walls of

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the accursed house, to break in upon the assassins and to butcher them where they stood, possessed me as a fever. There was not a man in the regiment who would not have galloped through the night at Léon's call. Pity then if we might not avenge him.

This I had said, when another whistle from the river bank arrested my attention and sent me back to Bardot.

He still lay behind the bush which concealed us, and his hand was raised in warning. When I rejoined him he pulled me down, and speaking in a deep whisper, he bade me listen. A boat was being rowed across the river. We saw it plainly in the moonlight—a great, crazy tub with a frail girl for its pilot. It touched the bank some fifty yards from the place where we lay hidden, and instantly the girl leapt from it and disappeared in the brushwood.

“Valerie St. Antoine, by all that is holy!” said I.

The mystery was deepening truly, but we were nearer to it now, and without a word spoken we strode toward the deserted boat and immediately began to pull across the river.

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IV

MEANWHILE what of Léon, and what had happened to him since he left Moscow? I shall try to tell you in a few words, that you may understand both his situation and ours, and the meaning of what was to come after.

The letter he had received was such as a soldier of the Guard is well acquainted with, and he discovered in it nothing out of the ordinary.

A pretty woman had fallen in love with him and desired to see him again. There must have been two hundred who had done that since he quitted Paris, yet few who drew from him so swift a response.

Was not Mademoiselle Valerie a fellow-countrywoman, and had not these two looked into each other's eyes as lovers are wont to do?

I remembered the impression she had made upon him in the prince's palace, and how he had sworn to hunt her out at Moscow; and I for one could not wonder that his heart leapt when she wrote to him and named a rendezvous to his liking.

He was to dine with her, the letter said, and her carriage would carry him to the barracks afterwards. He little knew the kind

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of journey that it was meant to be, nor what would lie under the tarpaulin which the assassins had made ready for him.

So off goes our gay cavalier, dressed in his best and as cock-a-hoop as a page-boy who has been kissed by a duchess.

The warnings he received fell on deaf ears. He knew that the regiment had lost good officers who went out upon just such a foolish errand as this ; but they had gone to Russian houses, while Valerie was a Frenchwoman who bore an honoured name. There could be nothing to fear in such society. He would dine with her and tell her what she most desired to hear. This was a Guardsman's proper employment, and he would not be doing his duty if he shirked it. To give him his due, Léon was rarely remiss in these matters.

So you will understand why he did not suspect anything — even when they drove through the wood and came to the drawbridge. She would desire secrecy, of course, and this place appeared to be a very citadel of love. Léon merely remarked that aspect of it when he crossed the bridge and the great gate which Ivan the Terrible had built was shut upon him.

She would be alone, and he would find her complacent. The words were hardly said when

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he found himself face to face with Nicholas, the princely assassin, whose name had struck terror to the heart of many a French prisoner.

Now a man trained to the surprises of war has some command of himself whatever the circumstances.

Léon was such a man, and you may be sure he did not betray himself.

Though the peril of the situation was now fully revealed, and he understood the trap into which he had fallen, what should he do but bow in a grand manner to his Highness, and declare his pleasure at that *rencontre*? The prince in his turn affected to be as agreeably surprised. He apologised for the absence of Mademoiselle Valerie, whom he declared to be confined to her room with an indisposition; and upon that he led the way immediately to the great apartment in which the supper was to be served.

This was nothing else than the round tower which Ivan had built, and a strange place it was, surely, for the entertainment of a man's friends. Léon observed that the walls of the apartment were hung entirely in black velvet, while at the northern arch there was a platform similarly draped in black, but with its plain boards strewn with rushes, as they strew a scaffold in my own country. So

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ominous was this that even my nephew's sang-froid was hard put to it to forbear a remark ; but the prince smiled affably all the time, and appeared to be quite unaware that there was anything extraordinary about this habitation. Léon admitted that he spoke French like a fellow-countryman, and his first act was to introduce my nephew to some dozen officers of the Russian Guard who had come to the house to make merry with him.

These were fine fellows, clad, as he, in the splendid white and gold uniform of the Tsar's cuirassiers. They welcomed a brother officer with professed cordiality, and the prince commanding that supper should be served, they turned with one accord to the table and began to fall upon the viands as though ravenous with hunger. Will you be surprised to hear that Léon did not imitate them in this ? I shall tell you why in a word : he had seen a dead body in the straw upon the platform, and, looking at it a second time, he perceived that it was a trunk without a head

You may imagine what this discovery meant—even to a man of Léon's disposition. At first he would have it that the whole thing was one of Nicholas's jokes—the draping of the room, the straw upon the mock scaffold, and the ghastly figure which the rushes tried

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to hide. Then he remembered the prince's evil reputation and the stories of his savagery, which had been told at many a bivouac. Here was one of those fanatics who believed that Moscow was the holy city, and that we, the French, were so many barbarians who had profaned the sacred shrine of Russia. No trick was too treacherous to be employed against us, no trap was not justified which had Frenchmen for its object. Again and again, as we had marched across Russia, the throats of our fellows had been cut in many a lonely farmhouse, and many a courtesan had lured honest men to their destruction.

So Léon sat there with his eyes fixed upon the body and the secret words of warning drumming in his ears. What hope had he of escape from such a place? He remembered the moat and the drawbridge, the lonely wood and the dark groves about it, and despair fell upon him. It remained but to die as the Guards know how; and, believing that his death was imminent, he refused no longer the goblets of wine which were offered to him, and affected a merriment as loud as that of the noble assassins who had entrapped him.

A remarkable feast, truly, as you shall judge by his own account of it. The meats were served on dishes of solid gold; the goblets

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were of the same precious metal. They drank champagne from our own kingdom of France ; the rich red wines of Italy, while the joyous fruits of the Rhineland vineyards were not lacking. The food itself had an Eastern flavour, and many of the dishes were highly spiced and Eastern. For music there were fiddles in a gallery above, and even the distant voices of women singing a light chanson at the back of the stage.

Léon raised his eyes to the musicians' gallery from time to time, and fell to wondering if Valerie were among the singers. Surely she had never written the letter which brought him to this house—she, a Frenchwoman ! He could not believe it ; and yet the note had been in a woman's handwriting. Possibly the writer was one of those who now sang disreputable songs behind the curtains of the gallery. Léon pitied rather than condemned the poor wretch who had been the prince's instrument. When he remembered that Valerie loved this man he could have taken a knife from the table and killed him where he sat.

His Highness may have guessed what was in the young man's mind, but if he did so, a courtly art concealed it. Never was there a gayer companion. He told stories of all the cities to which peace or war had carried him—

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of our own Paris and gloomy Petersburg, of gay Vienna and that monstrously dull town of London, of which the English boast. Nearly all concerned the women of these places and the successes he had had among them.

His companions meanwhile listened with a deference which so high a personage commanded. Their jokes were often *sotto voce*, and when the prince laughed they laughed in sycophantine imitation. With all this Léon plainly perceived that the feast was but a preparation for some greater scene to come. His eyes went often now to the curtain above the gallery, as though he would read a secret there. I do not think he was astonished when for one brief instant the same curtain trembled and was drawn a little way back, to disclose the face of Valerie. She was in the house, then, after all! He began to believe that she had written the letter, and for that he would have strangled her willingly. Then he heard the prince speaking to him, and, the curtain being dropped back, he turned to listen to a disquisition upon French politics.

“Your Revolution,” said his Highness, “was the greatest event in history. I have just been telling my friend, Count Rafalovitch here, that my father was in Paris in the year 1794, and that his dearest friend, the Chevalier

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Constantini, was executed by the miscreants on the Place de la Grève. He brought with him to Russia a model of the guillotine, by which so many of your great men perished. I have it here in this house, if you are curious to see it. It was made by the great Dr. Guillotin himself, one of the first to fall by his own invention, as you know. Shall we have it built up on yonder platform, M. le Capitaine? It will help us to pass the time until the musicians have refreshed themselves."

Now, all this was said pleasantly enough, as though it were the merriest of jests, and yet to Léon it was not without significance. The cat-like manner of the speaker; the sudden lust of blood which came into his eyes as he leaned over the table and addressed my nephew; the restless movements of the others round about; all betrayed a design so dastardly that no pretence could conceal it. Instantly it dawned upon Léon that the man whose body lay in the rushes had been murdered by that very instrument. Death no Guardsman fears, but the humiliation of such a death as this might have appalled the stoutest heart; and Léon believed now that they meant to kill him. He drained the heavy goblet of its wine to hide his face from those who watched him so

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curiously, and when he had set the goblet down there was a smile upon his lips.

“I should like to see it, by all means,” he said to the prince. “It is odd that I, a Frenchman, am so ignorant, but, upon my word of honour, I have never met ‘Dr. Guillotine’ in all my life.”

“Then you shall meet him now,” said his Highness, and touching a bell upon the table, he summoned his servants to the room.

V.

SERGEANT BARDOT and myself, meanwhile, had crossed the river, as you may well have guessed. We found the tub old and crazy, and were but poor watermen. Yet we reached the parapet upon the farther side, and clambering up, we stood and listened if any had discovered us. The sentry, however, made no motion, and perceiving that he was drunk, as we had imagined, we crept towards him and were upon him before he could utter a sound. A moment later he went, a cloth about his mouth, head-long into the moat below us, and we stood there watching his struggles, his musket in Bardot's hands.

It had been a swift coup, and some have

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complained of what we did. But remember that this was a Russian stronghold, and that it imprisoned a good comrade, and few will condemn us. It was our life or his, and we did not hesitate for Léon's sake. I would do the same to-morrow for the meanest trooper in the Emperor's army.

I say that we killed the man, and yet for the moment the deed did not help us. There was the great gate, shut and barred against the stranger, and twenty men might not have opened it. If we beat upon it and they answered us, what then? The house would be full of Russians, and we were but two against them. By a stratagem alone could we save Léon's life, and calling upon our wits, we began to make a tour of the house to spy out its weaknesses if we could.

These were not readily apparent. Even to an old soldier like Bardot the place seemed impregnable. Everywhere the rugged stone walls confronted us. There was no door other than that which the sentry had guarded. The windows were so many slits in those ramparts of stone. There was not even a water-pipe upon which a man could have got a foothold. We could but stand there and gaze impotently upon that prison which had defied the centuries. It was a torture to me to remember that these

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impregnable walls answered for the liberty of one so dear to me as my nephew.

VI

I HAVE told you that there had been a glimmer of light shining from a loop-hole in the tower when first we drove up to the place. It was beneath this we came to a halt and stood to reckon with the situation. Bardot's eyes were quick as an animal's, and it was he who perceived a second opening in the wall, but not so high as the other, and without a light beyond to disclose it. When he suggested that he should climb up on my shoulders and get a footing at this spot, I could but ask him what he hoped to effect thereby.

"Had you a rope," said I, "perchance we could look through the window, but since you have not a rope——"

He interrupted me with a little cry. "Major," says he, "there was a rope in the boat."

I retorted that we had used it to make the ship fast, but he laughed at that.

"We shall return by the drawbridge," says he. "Do you stand sentinel here, and I will get what we want." And with that he was

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off like a shot, and for some minutes I saw him no more.

The interval was spent in listening to a sound of distant music, which I could not hear very plainly. There were women's voices and the music of fiddles, and it seemed to me that I had heard some of their songs in the casinos of my own Paris. Such a surprise was very welcome and put heart into me. Léon could hardly be in peril while women were singing to him. I told Bardot as much when he returned, and his curiosity concerning the voices was not less than my own.

"Let us have a look at them," says he. And with that he climbed upon my shoulders, and throwing the rope he had brought from the boat deftly about the iron bar of the window he pulled himself up like a monkey, and so gained a foothold on the ledge.

For a long time now he did not utter a word. I thought that I heard him laughing softly, and then, of a sudden, he appeared to grow deeply interested in what was happening in the room.

"What do you see, Bardot?" I asked him, anxiety getting the better of me.

He did not reply, but peered the closer betwixt the bars.

"Oh!" cried I impatiently, "there will be some woman for a certainty."

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His answer was to take a pistol from his belt and to look to the priming. I could see him quite clearly, one arm being about the iron bar and the other upon the trigger, which he had cocked.

“Good God !” I cried. “You will bring them out on us.”

He did not heed me, but throwing his head back, he said in a loud whisper : “They are going to butcher your nephew.” At the same moment I heard a dreadful scream from the tower itself.

“Help me up !” cried I, gone mad at my own impotence. “Why do you not fire at them ?”

He nodded his head, and thrusting his pistol through the bars, he snapped at an unseen enemy. The weapon did not fire, and he threw it down to me angrily. “Your own,” he cried, and came a little way down the rope to reach it.

The next minute there was a loud report, and upon that a hollow sound, as though a great bell had been struck a heavy blow by a hammer.

“Now,” cried Bardot quickly, “to the bridge !”

I did not question him, and we ran round together to fling down the bridge, the windlass

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running out with the sound of a great ship's cable. It seemed inconceivable that the Russians in the place did not attack us. This, however, did not happen.

We ran across the bridge and there crouched as two hunters who themselves were hunted.

"Listen!" says Bardot, bending his ear to the earth.

I imitated him, and heard a strange sound. It was the thunder of cavalry through the wood.

"The Cossacks!" cried I. It seemed to me then that I should never see poor Léon again.

VII

WITHIN the tower the prince was now introducing my nephew to "Dr. Guillotine."

All the resources of a barbarous masquerade were employed in this sorry entertainment.

The stage itself would have served for a miniature Théâtre Français. Brawny Cossacks, clad like the *sansculottes* of the Revolution, swarmed up on the mock scaffold and cried curses upon their prisoner. The executioner was a huge Tartar with a monstrous black beard and a knife at his girdle. The knitting women of the Place de la Grève were

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not forgotten. A bevy of hags squatted about the platform and pointed their lean fingers at the miserable prisoner.

Had Léon a doubt hitherto as to the meaning of this foul business, it must have surrendered at the moment when he recognised one of his old troopers among the mock condemned, and perceived that the Russians meant to kill him.

Leaping to his feet, he cried an oath upon the outrage and commanded them to stop.

It was a vain outburst. Two of the prince's men had him by the arms at the first movement and pinned him to his chair, while his Highness derided his courage.

"Here is a French Guardsman who has a woman's heart," said he, his fellows shouting with ironic laughter at the sally. "We give him a little play, such as we have seen in Paris, and behold! he is ready to faint. A glass of wine, Michael, for the poor gentleman! Do you not see how ill he is?"

A goblet of wine was offered to and spurned by my nephew. He perceived that he was helpless and that the reputation of the Guards lay in his keeping. It remained to bear himself with what dignity he could, and turning to the prince, he exclaimed very coolly: "I apologise to your Highness, for it is not possible

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that you can be in earnest." And so he watched the drama to the end.

They had now dragged the struggling hussar to the plank of the guillotine and thrown and bound him there. Very deliberately they pushed him beneath the great knife, and then, all crying "Death to the French!" the blade fell and silenced for ever the shrieks of the unhappy wretch they had butchered.

Léon declares that from this moment Prince Nicholas was little better than a madman. His cries of "Bravo!" were such as the insane might have uttered. Clutching my nephew by the arm, he dragged him to the scaffold, saying :

"You do not know 'Dr. Guillotine'? Come and be introduced, then. Come and hear his music. You are a Frenchman and ignorant? Impossible, my friend, impossible."

So he raved, while all in the room took up the cry of "Impossible!" and began to shout and dance in their drunken frenzy like madmen.

Léon fought for his life then as he had never fought before in all wars our Emperor has waged. A strong man, he threw even the Cossacks from him, struck them senseless with any weapon that came to his hands, and was

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up and down like a cork upon a billow ; but all useless, as you may well imagine.

When they got him to the scaffold he knew that his hour had come, and a great calm possessed him.

“ I congratulate the Prince of the Assassins,” said he to his Highness. “ It is only in such a country as this that the butchers are ennobled.” And with that he walked straight towards the executioner and held out his hands.

The man seized him as though he were a sheep. The prince himself began to raise the knife by the rope and to caress its gleaming edge. Surely Léon had but a moment to live. He thought as much, and a passionate desire for life set him trembling. That he, so young, he whom so many loved, he to whom day was so fair a thing and the night but a witchery of woman’s eyes—that he should perish here, butchered by the insane in an hour of their frenzy ! God surely would not permit such a crime as that ! Alas ! he had forgotten how to pray these many years, and he but stood there, defying them as any one of his Majesty’s Guards would have done.

“ Assassins ! ” he cried ; and then, as a challenge : “ There is not one of you that would dare to cross swords with me ! ”

They but laughed at him the more, and the

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prince now pulled the knife so high that all in the room could see it. He was still laughing ; but some glimmer of reason had come to him, and that spirit of vengeance which animated him could no longer be denied.

“ You murdered twenty thousand honest people with your guillotine in Paris,” says he to Léon, as though a hussar of the year 1812 could be responsible for what was done in Paris twenty years before. “ Now you must come here to burn the Holy City. Very well ; we are going to teach you a lesson.”

He turned to the executioner, and giving him the sign, the wretch threw Léon upon the plank.

It was then that Bardot, at the window, fired his pistol and struck the great bell high in the tower above. How much would I have given could I have been at his side at that moment. All that I heard were the loud shouts of surprise, the cries of one man to the other that this was an ambush, and, above all, the prince's screams when the great knife fell and severed his arm at the elbow as neatly as any surgeon could have done.

Such was the truth. At the moment of the alarm Prince Nicholas had loosed the rope, and, trying to catch it again, he stumbled forward and the great blade caught him by

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the elbow, and his hand and arm went rolling to the floor.

With a loud cry Léon now wrenched himself from his executioners. All were making for the gate of the tower, for they believed that the French were upon them, and no man thought of anything but his own safety.

VIII

BARDOT and myself believed that the Cossacks were galloping to the place, and we lay in the shadow of the bridge, hardly daring to breathe lest the Russians in the house should discover us. When the latter came headlong out of the tower this alarm seemed unnecessary, for it was plain they were making for the forest.

“In five minutes,” I said, “they will meet their fellows and all return again to the butchery.”

I little knew that Valerie St. Antoine had found the droshky in the wood, and commanding the driver in the name of Prince Nicholas, had driven at full gallop to the barracks to bring help to her countrymen.

Such was the case, however, and the men who now rode to Ivan's Tower were of Léon's own troop; honest fellows who swore

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a bitter vengeance while they rode. They fell upon the Russians at the heart of the wood, and what they did there is best told at a bivouac. I went immediately to the tower and looked there for my nephew.

When I found him he lay senseless upon the scaffold, and at first I thought he was dead. The Guard, however, is obstinate in refusing to die, and when we had forced brandy between his lips and had bathed his forehead, he opened his eyes and asked where he was.

This I feared to tell him, but presently he sat up and looked about him.

"Ah!" he said, "I remember." And then he asked:—"Where is Valerie St. Antoine?"

"She should be in Moscow by this time," said I. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," said he, "I am still looking for her, mon oncle."

I shook my head. It seemed to me that the young woman in question had proved herself to be but the harbinger of ill. And yet I could see that my nephew's mind was made up, and that what he had done to-night he would do again if Valerie St. Antoine did but lift her pretty hand to beckon him.

CHAPTER III

THE TREASURE IN THE WOODS

I

It was on the 18th day of October in the year 1812 that we first heard of His Majesty's intention to abandon Moscow.

This came to us as a very great surprise.

It is true that we had had a terrible time in the city, which was now become a ruin, the convicts having burned down a great part of it; but we had learned to make the best of affairs and what with our plunder and our pleasures the time went merrily enough. I myself was perhaps the hardest-worked man in the regiment. So many people were burned by the fires in Moscow, so many were injured in the street brawls, that the hospitals were quite full, and I rarely knew a moment of leisure.

My nephew, Captain Léon, was situated very differently. There was hardly a day that he did not tell me of some new adventure with a woman, and when I would reproach him

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he reminded me that I had been young myself and should know the habits of a soldier better.

This was in Moscow after Valerie St. Antoine had done us so great a service upon a memorable night. Though Léon watched for her and offered five hundred francs to any man who would tell him of her whereabouts, he never saw her again while we were in the city, and when we did meet her this great army of ours was but a skeleton.

How little we foresaw the doom awaiting us when we quitted Moscow on that sunny October day !

Everything went as merry as a marriage bell then. We knew that we were returning to our own France and we cared not a scudo for the reason. The Emperor, we said, had been too much for these wily Russians, and they had surrendered everything. The truth was far otherwise — it was the Russians who had been too clever for us, and burning down their beautiful city, had left us to a woe-ful fate. Of this I am now about to speak to you.

II

THE story begins with a woman, as it began aforetime when we entered the city.

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There had been three days of beautiful weather when we of the Guard rode in fine spirits toward our own country and gave no thought but to the plunder we were carrying out of Russia.

I myself had many a good thing in the wagon, and I remember well a great gold plate set with diamonds, which had been torn from Ivan's Cross when we tried to pull it down from the cathedral in the Kremlin.

The men themselves were loaded with pretty trinkets, and carried furs enough to clothe Paris. The costliest skins—ermine and sable and lion and bear—were used for every conceivable purpose; and it is no wonder that the army was followed by thousands of Jews, waiting to buy these treasures when their owners should be weary of them.

Truly would I say that such a scene as our exit from Moscow was never written before in the story of warfare, nor will ever be written again.

Imagine a great white wooded plain, a sandy road at the heart of it, and upon this road an interminable procession of carts and wagons to carry the baggage of the Grand Army.

Upon either side in the fields go cavalry and infantry, every man's knapsack packed with loot, the commonest troopers sucking the

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rarest liqueurs from costly bottles, the poorest fellows smoking pipes with bowls of gold and tobacco that only princes should have been able to afford. All was hope and gaiety. Paris lay twelve hundred leagues from us, yet to Paris and our homes we were going. Who shall wonder if the trumpets blew a merry blast and the bands set our feet dancing? Was not the Emperor in our midst, and should we not return in a blaze of glory?

In such content we marched for three days. There was not much discipline observed, and the men were permitted to go pretty well as they pleased, it being always understood that the dreaded Cossacks were on our flank and that any foolhardiness might bring a disaster upon us. This kept the stragglers more or less in touch with the main body of the army; but sometimes we officers would ride away into the woods to see what kind of hospitality we could find at a country house and to enjoy it according to our opportunities.

It was on such an occasion that Léon and I first met Zayde, and came near to losing our lives because of her. I must tell you of this before going on to speak of the other days which followed, when the north wind began to blow and all that wide landscape lay under its veil of the cruel snow.

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We had been riding through a shady wood about a mile from the high road to Smolensk. Someone had discovered that there was a famous old monastery in the district noted for its hospitality ; and although we expected little from any Russian monk, we were quite able to help ourselves should the opportunity be offered. This quest carried us farther and farther away from our comrades, until at last we appeared to have lost the road altogether, and to be as far away from any monastery as ever we were in all our lives. My own thought was for going back immediately, but the younger head would hear nothing of it, and my nephew protested loudly that I was becoming a coward.

“ It is the good living in Moscow that has destroyed your nerve, uncle,” said he. “ How could we be better off than we are in this place ? Soft grass to gallop on, shady trees above, and the sun shining as though it were midsummer in our own France. We shall come to the monastery presently, and they will give us wine that Adam brewed. There will be plenty of loot to add to our saddle-bags, and perhaps there will be sisters to comfort us. Why should we go back ? The road is over there any time we have a fancy to rejoin it.”

I retorted by reminding him that the Cossacks were out, and that we might en-

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counter them at any time. More than once I thought that I heard a distant sound of galloping, and I drew rein to call his attention to it. But he would not listen to me, and still riding southwards, as it seemed, he pulled up at length and cried in real astonishment :

“ Why, uncle, what did I tell you ? Here is Cleopatra herself and her treasures with her, as I am alive ! ”

I came up to him and saw what had arrested his attention. There was a deep pit before us and in it a Cossack and a woman. The former sprang up at our coming, and drawing a pistol from his belt, he snapped it at Léon's head. Happily the powder did not fire, and seeing that we were two to one, the fellow hurled the weapon at my nephew's horse and immediately bolted for the shelter of the woods.

So we were alone with the lady and her treasure, and this, at a modest estimate, must have been worth half a million of francs.

III

I HAVE never seen such riches spread in a green wood before, nor am I likely to do so if I live to a hundred years.

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Consisting of jewels chiefly, there were other objects there and all precious beyond words.

Great ropes of Eastern pearls, diamonds and emeralds; Indian images in solid gold; the most wonderful robes of ermine and sable; jewelled scabbards that should have come from Damascus—all these lay littered upon the grass by the side of the impassive woman, who now looked at us with the eyes of a child and uttered no word either of protest or of appeal.

Certainly she was a remarkably beautiful creature.

Not more than seventeen years of age, she had hair as golden as the sands of the sea, the white skin of the Circassian and the dark eyes of the Persian beauty.

Her dress was an odd compromise between the East and the West.

She had baggy breeches of blue silk, high riding-boots of Russian leather, a white and gold coat to her waist, and the kepi of the Austrian hussar. Over all she wore a superb cloak of ermine which would have brought a fortune could it have been sold in our own Paris.

Such was the apparition which confronted us in that lonely wood.

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Needless to say that we were both greatly moved by it; Léon chiefly, I fear, by the girl's big eyes; I by the wonders of the treasure which lay about her. To go down into the pit and to introduce ourselves was the work of an instant. Léon told her briefly that he was a French officer, and he begged leave to protect her. To this she answered not a word; but I could see that she was not displeased, and presently with a child's laugh she dragged him down beside her.

I know Léon so well, and have seen so many women fall a victim to his pleasing airs that this act did not surprise me as much as it should have done. None the less, I was astonished when presently the girl bade me sit also, and turning to one of the great bags beside her, she produced food and wine and set it before us.

The odd thing was that she could not speak a word of any language with which we tried her.

Of Russian I had learned a few sentences during our stay in Moscow, and German I spoke with some fluency; but neither the one nor the other was the slightest use; nor, need I say, had she any French. Thus we came to signs and mouthing, in which my nephew appeared to be so proficient that he was kissing

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her within twenty minutes of the encounter and hugging her like a bear before the meal was done.

Well, we finished the meal, and then, pointing to the wood, indicated to the girl that we must go. She had tried to tell us her name, which we made out to be something like Zoida or Zayde, and we asked her as well as we could to accompany us on our road and let us help her with the treasure. The astonishing thing was that she appeared almost indifferent to the existence of the latter, laughing like a child when we pointed to it, and throwing the diamonds about as though they had been pebbles. This angered me, for I saw the worth of the stuff; and presently, speaking in a wrathful tone, I commanded her to pack the things in the box from which they had been taken and to follow us. The new turn appeared to alarm her not a little, and she sat crouching there like a frightened gnome while Léon and I put the things in their cases and began to pack them upon our horses. How they came to be in that remote wood we knew no more than the dead; but it would clearly have been a crime to leave them there, and indeed we had not gone many paces upon the road before the secret of their presence was discovered.

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There was at an open glade of the forest a kind of amphitheatre crossed by a road to some southern town.

A wrecked coach stood at the junction, and all about it were the signs of a bloody combat.

I had been riding before the others at this particular moment, and my horse nearly stumbled over the body of an elderly man who had been shot in the head and his brains blown out. Near by lay his coachman, stabbed in many places and quite dead. Of the horses of the coach there was not a trace, and it was now plain to me that the treasure had come from it, and that this elderly man had been escaping southward when the robbers overtook him. Naturally I turned to the girl and began to question her angrily. She merely shook her head and shut her eyes, as though afraid to look upon the corpse. It was to say that she had had no hand in that bloody affair, and so much I could readily believe.

“Good heavens!” said I to Léon, “what an infamy, and more than that, what a mystery!”

He did not agree with me at all. A ready instinct told him what had happened.

“The carriage stuck in the sand yonder,” said he. “The servants went for horses to a neighbouring farm. This girl here may have

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been with them as a servant or she may not. The fellow who murdered them was the one we found with her in the wood. It is as simple as an open book, my dear uncle."

"Then," said I, "we will write the end of the story. Of course we must wait until the others return."

"What?" cried he; "with the night coming down and the Cossacks in the woods! That would be madness indeed, my uncle."

And then he added with a laugh, "The old gentleman is in heaven and is in no need of diamonds. We shall know very well what to do with them when we get in Paris. Let us make haste before we are discovered."

He did not wait for me to reply, but holding the girl close to him on the saddle he trotted on through the wood, and I followed him reluctantly.

We were as rich as Croesus, yet how we were going to get out of the forest, where we should find the army, or what chance we had of carrying our treasure to Paris, I knew no more than the dead.

IV

THE way now lay through a wide avenue—one of the most beautiful I had seen in

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Russia. The grass lay smooth and green, and bore no trace of the relentless summer. We might have been in the precincts of some princely château, and we were not at all surprised presently when we came upon a considerable building which had all the air of one of those picturesque monasteries in which Russia abounds. Had we any doubt of this, a great gilt dome with a Greek cross high above it would have settled it; for never have I seen a more beautiful object than this golden ball glistening amid the woods as though its heart were of fire, while a celestial radiance shone all about it. To Léon, however, it merely stood for a place whereat we might get food and drink.

"These monks are very decent fellows," he said; "they know how to entertain strangers. The regiment will bivouac not far from here, and we may just as well stay the night in yonder building as sleep in a mouldy barn. Cheer up, uncle, and think of the good wine you are about to drink. It's the luckiest thing that could have happened to us."

I looked at the girl in his arms and wondered if he spoke truly.

We were now within a quarter of a mile of the building and could see a portcullis and a gate from which men on horseback were riding

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out. When they approached nearer it was plain that they were the servants of the dead man whose body lay in the woods behind us ; and observing this we drew aside behind the trees to let them pass. It was evident that they had told the story of their trouble to the good monks in yonder building ; and some of the latter, clad in brown habits with white cords about their waists, were going down to their assistance.

I noticed that the servants were five in number and were all heavily armed. Obviously they must have been men of little sense to have left their master alone with a bandit in such a place and so to have contributed to his death. The same idea occurred to Léon, who did not fail to point out to me the nature of the peril from which he had saved the girl, who now lay trembling in his arms.

“ They would have cut her to pieces if we had not come up,” said he. “ We are doing a work of mercy, mon oncle, in saving her from them. Let us get on to the monastery and tell our own story. Of course we know nothing of any carriage or its owners ; we are just officers of the Grand Army, and if we are not treated properly our comrades will see to it. I count it very fortunate that things have

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turned out so. We shall get an excellent dinner and a good night's rest, and to-morrow we shall be with the regiment again. Could anything be better ? ”

He seemed well pleased enough, and I did not know what answer to make to him. As for the Eastern woman, common sense said that he would send her about her business in the morning ; but not until he had made sure that she could go in safety. These things pertain to war, and it is not possible to disguise them. Léon was just as fifty thousand others who marched at the Emperor's summons, neither better nor worse ; and if there be any excuse to be made for him, it is that he had a sentiment towards the sex which was rarely lacking in nobility.

“ Let no man consider himself happy until he is dead,” said I, imitating the philosopher ; and with that I pressed on at his side until we came to the gate of the monastery, and nothing remained but to tell our story to the good monks within. This was easier than might have seemed, for they had no word of our own tongue and we none of theirs. It was a matter of gesture from the beginning, and in this we excelled them without question. But first let me speak of the building we now entered.

The monastery covered some three acres of

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ground. There were a few tilled fields about it and a considerable courtyard in the Eastern fashion. The chapel was a rude imitation of the Church of St. Ivan at Moscow, and had a similar cross, though of smaller size, upon its gilded dome.

The whole enclosure had been heavily walled about as a protection against any raiding bands of brigands; and there were even ancient cannon upon its battlement. Although lacking a moat, there was a big pool or lake before its main gate, and this was spanned by a primitive bridge with a portcullis beyond it. Here we found the keeper of the gate, a sturdy bearded monk, filthy in aspect if servile in manner. He seemed not a little awed by our uniform and equipment, but when he caught sight of the girl on Léon's saddle, a broad grin animated his features and he no longer delayed to open.

So we rode into a small courtyard and there tethered our horses. The chapel lay to the south of this, and there came to us rude sounds of Gregorian chanting, which is the fashion in their Church, and very melodious when executed by the best singers. Those who now recited the sacred office were not of such a class, and their barbarous voices suggested that we were in Araby rather than in

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civilised Europe. This, however, did not concern us. Our desire was for food and shelter, and following a monk into a vast refectory we signified our wants to him and commanded him to satisfy them. In his turn he did not appear unwilling to oblige us, and motioning us to sit at the table, he went from the refectory and left us alone.

Now I should tell you that the girl Zayde had entered this monastery with some reluctance, and in spite of Léon's endearments she seemed very ill at ease while we remained there. Léon, on the other hand, had found his best spirit, and was in the mood for any adventure which might come to him. Perhaps the church and the habit suggested the absurdity on which he now set his heart, for, turning to me suddenly, he said :

“How now, my uncle, is not this the very place for a wedding? What would you say if I told you that I was going to marry Zayde? Is she not beautiful enough? Look at her and tell me honestly what you think.”

I answered that he was making a fool of himself and bade him be silent. The girl half understood his meaning, I think, for the colour came and went from her pretty face, and she watched him with eyes that plainly acquiesced in any such determination. None the less his

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words offended me, and I did not wish to hear them repeated. Though these monks were not of my own religion, I respected them, and would not have profaned their holy building. So much Léon must have learned from my looks, for he slapped me gaily upon the shoulder and said that I was not born to be a jester.

“What is marriage, my uncle?” he asked. “A few words gabbled by the priest, and neither the one nor the other caring a pin’s point about them. Why should I not marry Zayde? She is young, and, I will wager, well born. I am a bachelor and free to do what I please. What is there to prevent my making her my wife if I choose?”

I rejoined that he had said the same thing of Valerie St. Antoine, and at the mention of her name he flushed and became a little serious.

“Valerie St. Antoine is dead,” said he; “why do you remind me of her?”

“Because in my hearing you swore to her to marry no other woman.”

“Oh, my dear uncle, how easily one imposes upon you!” And at the same thought he burst out laughing, and catching the girl in his arms, he kissed her as though she were already much more to him than an acquaintance of the roadside.

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It was at this point that the monk returned to us, followed by many of his brethren. They were all rugged men, bearded and of evil countenance, and I perceived in a moment that they recognised us for what we were—the enemies and the invaders of their country. Not a sign of hospitality did we detect upon any one countenance in that formidable group. They swarmed about us as though willing enough to do us a mischief if they dared, and so threatening became their manner that we both drew our swords, and Léon a pistol as well.

This put a new complexion on the affair. The most part of them now stood back a little, while their prior, a venerable man with a great gold cross on his breast, held out his hands as though in supplication and addressed us rapidly in the Russian tongue. When he discovered that we could only answer him in monosyllables he made a gesture of despair, and turning to the keeper of the refectory, he gave him an order whose nature was soon apparent. The fellow left the room, but returned anon with three flagons of their native wine and some vast loaves of black bread, which seems to be the only sort procurable in this God-forsaken country. These viands were set upon the table and we were

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bidden to eat and drink, while the monks stood about and watched us very curiously.

I have told you that all these faces were strangely alike, as is ever the case when men are old and bearded and of the same nationality. One face, however, struck me as familiar. It was that of a young monk who tried to hide himself amid his brethren, but when I would have verified my suspicions, he turned his back upon me and left the room without remark. The others continued to force their meagre hospitalities upon us, offering the wine freely, but keeping it, I observed, from the girl at their side. She, indeed, appeared to be *anathema maranatha* to these holy men. Perhaps it was the first time that a woman had ever sat to bread in their refectory ; but however it may have been, it was grotesque to find them afraid so much as to touch the hem of her garment, and as curious about her as though she had been a wild animal in a menagerie.

Their antics made Léon laugh incontinently, and his laughter was shared by the girl, though not as freely as might have been expected from such a lady. To me it seemed that she had become aware suddenly of some peril in the place and was anxious to be gone from it. I observed her pluck Léon by the arm and make

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an appeal to him of a kind I could but imagine. When he told me in a whisper that she spoke French after all, needless to say I was very much astonished.

“Very well,” said I, “she will understand your love-making now.”

He agreed that it was so.

“The priests will marry us after dinner,” says he, “and we will take her to Smolensk. What an adventure, my uncle! Is not war the father of all adventures, as I have often told you?”

I made some commonplace remark and tried to stay the hand of the monk, who was refilling my glass with very fiery spirit. Truth to tell, this now mounted to my head, as it had mounted to Léon's already, and presently the scene before me became confused and unreal, while the walls were reeling before my eyes and the roof threatening to fall on my head. I detest a drunkard, and this condition occurred to me as very shameful. On the other hand, I had drunk but little of their wine and could not account for my condition; but when I called to the monks for water they proffered me a drink of another kind, and so potent was this that I lost consciousness almost immediately, and must have slept for many hours before I came to my senses again.

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V

It must have been near midnight when this happened, and the moonlight, shining in the glade where I lay, soon showed me that I was alone.

Oddly enough, the monks had carried me to the very place where the carriage had been robbed, and when I got the stiffness out of my limbs and the dizziness out of my head I perceived that this was as we had left it, and the scene unchanged, save that the dead had been carried away. I knew the place to be but a quarter of a mile from the monastery, and wondered why they had carried me so far. But chiefly I began to think of my nephew and the girl, and to speculate upon their fortunes.

It was no light thing to be left there in the forest with the Cossacks all about and my regiment bivouacked God knows where, and a chance of being eaten by wolves into the bargain. On the other hand, I had a great fear for Léon, and was almost ready to believe that they had killed him in the monastery. Certainly such fellows would have done anything for the treasure, and very possibly Léon's head had been stronger than mine and he had contested its possession with them;

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in which case I did not doubt they had slain him, and the fact that I was alone seemed to warrant the supposition.

Now this was troubling me, and I had a great fear both of the place and of the hour, when I heard a sound of voices in the glade, and presently made out the figures of horsemen moving amid the trees.

At first I took them to be Cossacks, and was about to make off as best I could, when to my great surprise and pleasure I heard Léon himself calling to me. Never was the sound of a voice more welcome.

“ Léon ! ” I cried, and running up to him I found myself surrounded by a squadron of the Red Hussars, in the midst of whom Léon himself was riding his own horse and leading mine by the bridle.

“ Well met, my uncle ! ” says he, in his boyish humour. “ And so they have not put the habit on you after all. We have ridden three leagues in quest of you, and here you are at the very door. Well, that is lucky, for time presses, and there is good work to do. What do you say to a little fire to warm our hands on such a night ? ”

I told him that it would be an excellent thing, though I had then no idea of his meaning. His affection for me was very real, and

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while his speech made a jest of it, I could see how pleased he was that he had found me in the wood.

“It was that cursed liquor of theirs,” says he. “I have never drunk its like. We must have both dropped off like children in a cradle, and then they carried us out. I woke up God knows where, and but for these good fellows I might still be in the same place. Now we are going to teach the holy friars a lesson. Do you realise that they have got the woman and her jewels, and we must burn them out to recover them? Come along, my uncle. Here is an adventure that is only just beginning.”

He seemed greatly pleased with himself, and rode jauntily enough, as though the event were greatly to his liking. My own wit had grown a little clearer by this time, and I could acquiesce in his determination to have it out with the monks. After all, they were not of our faith, and they had treated us very scurvily. The girl was no business of theirs, and even if the treasure had been looted, they had neither part nor lot in the affair. It was plainly our duty to teach them a lesson and to recover the property which the fortunes of war had bestowed upon us; and with this in our minds we rode up to the

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gate of the monastery and beat upon it insistently.

“No more of their liquor for me,” says Léon, as he snapped a pistol in the lock of the great gate and then pulled their bell furiously. “We will give them a taste of our vintage and see if it goes to their heads. If it doesn’t, I fancy that a prick from the point of a sword may well go somewhere else. Rest assured, dear uncle, we will have our pockets full of diamonds before the day breaks, and the girl upon my saddle-bow. Let us see what kind of a chant these holy men like best. Upon my word, they sleep like dogs after a hunting!”

Truly it was surprising that, after all the hullabaloo we had made, no one opened to us. The great monastery showed no light of any kind whatever. Both doors and windows were heavily barred as though against a ruthless invader, and listen as we might we could hear no sound within. The subterfuge merely angered Léon. He began to understand that even a squadron of hussars is powerless against a barrier of iron, and that for all we could do to the holy men within we might as well have been in Moscow. This, as I say, had not occurred to him before, and he now rode round and round the precincts as though there must be some loophole in the vast wall which defied

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us, some gate which the carbines of the company could force. We found none, and the men's chagrin was undisguised. They had been promised food and loot if they took the place, and yet they were as far from taking it as any child would have been.

"You will never do it," said I to Léon. "The wolves have gone to ground, and nothing but fire will fetch them out. You should have brought a gun, my boy; that would have made short work of them."

He admitted it, and began to blame himself for his stupidity. The artillery, according to his reckoning, was three leagues from the place; but presently one of the hussars remembered that some of Marshal Ney's guns were with the van of the rearguard and could not be farther than a league from the place.

"We can have them here by dawn," said the fellow, and there being nothing else for it we dispatched half a dozen of them at full gallop to bring a field piece to the place. The gunners, we said, would come readily enough when the story of the loot was told to them. Never had I known one of the Grand Army turn from that, whatever the circumstance.

So the men rode off and left us upon the

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edge of the lake which bordered the eastern wall of the monastery.

Though the day had been warm enough, the night fell intolerably cold, and we wrapped ourselves in our cloaks, and having tethered the horses, fell to walking round the monastery as though it would yet reveal its secrets. Impossible to believe that a treasure of half a million francs and one of the most beautiful women in Russia were locked up in that gloomy place, and we, Vélites and hussars of the Grand Army, impotent to get one or the other. Yet such was a fact and such the cunning of the monks that neither light was shown to us nor a footstep to be heard in all the hours of our vigil.

Dawn had come before the hussars returned with half a battery from Ney's own rearguard. We heard the sound of the horses in the wood, and anon the heavy wheels of the guns crunching over the gravel of the precincts. Then also we heard for the first time a signal from the monastery, the great bell of which began to toll mournfully, as though holding a requiem for the dead. The sound inspired us and brought every man to his feet.

"The birds are caged after all," said I to Léon. "We will now see how they can fly."

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VI

THE bridge across the lake was not stout enough to carry a gun ; but we quickly had three upon the brink of the water, and at the third discharge we brought down the great door of wood and iron and not a little of the masonry with it. Such a ragout of rusty iron and plaster saints did not disturb us at all ; and running triumphantly across the bridge, we entered the monastery, swords drawn, to ferret out the monks.

Let me tell you in a word that we found no human being within the place. From room to room we ran, crying to each other in chapel and refectory and deserted cell, and hearing nothing but our own voices in reply. Such a mystery was beyond any I had known. The monks were here, we said, or else the devil himself had rung their bell. Nay, there were traces of their recent occupation—rude beds just disturbed ; a faint fire in a primitive kitchen ; the very candles lighted before the icons or images in their chapel. Yet not so much as the girdle of a monk in all the place, and as for the treasure, I do not believe the fiend himself could have found a sou.

Well, there we were, some eighty men gathered in the morning light and looking

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as foolish as school lads surprised in an orchard.

When our first rage had somewhat calmed; reason began to assert itself, and we said that there must be some passage beneath the lake by which the fathers had gone out. This caused a new quest of a highly diverting kind, for now it was every ferret to find a hole, and never did men work more willingly. To and fro they went like hounds in a thicket. Panels they tried and traps in cellars they lifted. Walls were pierced with our swords and doors were beat down, until the place looked as though it had stood the ravages of a siege. Yet the mockery of it all was that we might as well have hunted diamonds in the Place de la Révolution at Paris. Not a trace of any secret passage did we find, not a hole large enough to pass a dog; and when after hours of labour we came to the conclusion that the mystery was beyond us, a similar hunt in the woods yielded no more profit. Scattering wide about the monastery in enlarging circles, we must have ridden twenty leagues a man before we gathered at sunset to remind each other that the Cossacks might trap us and that we must rejoin the army at all costs. The graver peril guiding us, we rode off reluctantly, and soon the fateful

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monastery and even the woods about it were lost to our view.

Night had fallen for the second time now, and we had entered a land of great spaces. But more than that, we were traversing an enemy's country, and anon we espied a large body of Cossacks—three thousand as we judged—who plainly had observed us and immediately sat down to the pursuit. This was a turn that we might have looked for, but, in our imprudence, had risked. It was now each for himself and the devil take the laggards. We should be sabred to a man if these assassins rode us down, and, with a cry of "En avant!" we set spurs to our jaded horses and rode wildly across the plain. God alone could tell whether we should find the army or lose it.

It was a race for life with night and the mystery of night all about us.

How to tell you of that memorable gallop I hardly know. No race at Chantilly ever found horses so tired or riders at such a tension. On we thundered, and on and on. Now we would cry that we were saved; again that all was lost. The dust enveloped us in clouds; the moon magnified the great plain we must cross to the woods beyond. Let us gain them and we might find the army after all. I had said as much when a figure pressed out

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of the hurly-burly and I knew it for that of a Cossack. He slashed at me with a great scimitar, and slashed again. Then I heard a pistol shot, and seeing the fellow reeling in his saddle, I cut him through the skull to the very marrow. He was but the first of twenty, and so we went riding and slashing and halloaing for a league or more until we had bested their leaders and were alone on the great plain once more. Alas ! how brief a respite ! We had thousands still to deal with, and they rode after us like devils. No sailors lost upon a black and stormy sea went more blindly than we upon that fateful night. The army had vanished ; we believed no longer that we should find it.

Meanwhile, there were always the green devils behind us. I should give no true picture of this affair if I denied that there was another side to it. Some of our men fell and were hacked to pieces where they lay. Others were overtaken and cut down by the ruthless swords of the Cossacks. We could not lift a finger to save them—ten would have perished for one who fell had we done so. Our one hope lay in the swiftness of our horses. “En avant !” we cried, and again “En avant !” We must find the army or perish. Ah, what a vain hope and how

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Fate played with us ! For my part I believed that all was over when I first saw the fire in the wood and heard my comrades cry out. The Russians were then but a hundred paces from us—the light that we saw might be anything. God knows, we raced for it—and to discover what ? A priest and a woman—Zayde and the shorn monk, who I never doubted was a Cossack all the time.

There they were—hobnobbing by a fire of logs and greatly startled when they heard the sound of hoofs. Immediately they ran off into the thicket, but not before we had recognised them—my nephew and I. They were hardly gone when a louder cry arose from every Frenchman in the wood ; for now, as the very light of heaven itself, the glow of a dozen bivouac fires burst upon our aching eyes, and with one voice we cried : “ Vive l’Empereur ! ” and swore that the army should avenge us.

VII

WAR teaches us many lessons, but none more useful than that of its accidents. You will have said already that we had found the army and that nothing remained but to ride up to the outposts and raise an alarm.

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Let me answer that nothing was farther from the truth. We had neither found the army nor were any of our comrades there to avenge us. When I told this story in the year 1813 in Paris I well remember the laughter it excited. A squadron of hussars saved by a flight of monks! Thus the newspapers referred to it, and such was the naked truth. The monks saved us—the monks from the monastery we had sacked.

Never have I forgotten that moment when this ridiculous turn first became apparent to us. The Cossacks, I say, were at our heels, hope gone from us, all thought of the army abandoned, when we saw the bivouac fires and rode madly up to them. “Vive l’Empereur!” was our cry. Then we learned the truth.

There were a hundred or more monks in the woods: they had kindled the fires which cheered us. The Cossacks, perceiving the fires, and being deceived as we were, waited for no verification of a fact which seemed self-evident. The French army lay encamped in that place—who else would be there in these days of war and of a mighty host upon the march? Do you wonder that the mad devils stopped as though they heard already the roar of our guns, that they wheeled about

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and were gone as foxes whom the moon has discovered? They would have been madmen to have done anything else. The race had been run and we were the victors. So at least they thought, and so did Fortune smile upon us in that fateful hour.

Be sure we did not linger upon an accident so remarkable. The monks appeared to have no fear of us when we rode by, and the most part of them lay sleeping. We forbore to intrude upon their dreams; and going on at our leisure, we came up with the army at dawn and there recited the details of this amazing adventure.

It remains but to say a word of the bell and the treasure.

I have often discussed it with Léon, and we have come to the conclusion that there must have been monks left in the monastery after the main body had fled, and that they sounded the alarm upon the approach of the hussars. Their situation when we sacked that dismal building must have been parlous indeed, and God alone knew where they hid from us.

As for the treasure, I have since learned that it belonged to a certain Prince Karasin, a Tartar from beyond the Urals. He had been murdered by his servants just as I had supposed, and the woman upon whom he had lavished

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the treasure must have been a witness of the wickedness. Her subsequent fate I am unable to tell you, but my nephew Léon, with his accustomed gallantry, still swears that she was innocent, and, Valerie St. Antoine excepted, by far the most beautiful thing he ever discovered in that God-forsaken country.

CHAPTER IV

PHANTOM MUSIC

I

I NEVER thought to see Valerie St. Antoine again after we had left Moscow; but here I was quite wrong, as you shall learn presently, and my next encounter with her was as strange an affair as any I remember during the war.

You will remember that we had marched out of Moscow on the 19th day of October, in the year 1812; but it was the 29th of that month when the snow began to fall.

Hitherto our journey had not been unpleasant and had filled us with few apprehensions. It is true that the Russians were active, and there were not many villages to pillage, so that some murmurings were heard at an early date, and men complained bitterly of the lack of bread. But we were given to understand that all this would be set straight presently, and that we should find untouched supplies at Smolensk, the first big town between Moscow and the frontier. Meanwhile,

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many carried a little store of provisions in their knapsacks, and the officers were generally well looked after despite the difficulties. We found marching easy in the early days, and even when the rain fell, and the roads became heavy, the wagons were not seriously hampered. All went light-heartedly, thinking of our beloved France and of the triumph we were to celebrate there.

Then came the snow. It began to fall on the evening of the 29th, as I have said, and, save that there was cold rain during the following week, we never saw the green ground again until we came to the valley of the Rhine. Ah, the first of these terrible days—how well I remember it!

Léon and I rode side by side, a great press of horsemen before us; behind us, in a seemingly unbroken line, the carts and wagons of the transport. Upon either side were the hussars and the lancers, the *chasseurs à cheval*, the Guards from Portugal, the Italians, with Prince Eugène. The Emperor himself was then half a day's march ahead of us, but we expected to come up with him at Slawkowo, and there to enjoy our well-earned rest. We had frost, as you shall hear, but there is no pen that can tell you of what we suffered by the way.

There had been black clouds rolling down

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from the northward all day, but the snow itself did not burst upon us until the hour of sunset. It came heralded by a distant sound as of thunder upon a far horizon ; but this was no thunder that we heard—only a north wind roaring across that interminable plain.

Anon it came upon us with the fury of a southern tempest. Flakes of snow almost as big as a man's hand tumbled out of that leaden sky, were caught by the howling wind, and scattered in a fine powder which cut like steel. Soon everything was obliterated : the summer had finished before our eyes. Where there had been green grass and verdant woods, and even wild flowers by the roadside, there was now nothing but a monstrous sea, with here and there the white woods standing up as so many mighty ships upon a frozen ocean.

The army, marching hitherto in such good spirits, became but specks in this white wilderness. Never had Frenchmen known such cold, and great was the terror with which it inspired them. We saw cloaks flying and heads bent before the blast ; we heard the curses of the transport men, the shrill complaints of cantinières ; but above all the ceaseless howling of the blast, as though the God of Russia

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cried a vengeance upon us, and this was the hour of it.

All this was bad enough, but more was to follow when the Cossacks came like so many devils from the darkness.

They wheeled about us, piping a shrill defiance and waving their lances ominously. In our turn we were too sore stricken to attack them, and we rode like cravens, who submitted to fate without lifting a finger. Not until Marshal Ney himself came up with cannon did we drive the scarecrows off, and even then it was but a brief respite, for they were as swift as eagles and as elusive. Many a good fellow had a Russian lance in him that night, and the snow-field for his bed. It was a new page in the story of a triumph we had hoped to celebrate in Paris.

For myself I felt the cold bitterly, and I do not doubt that Léon suffered no less. We had heavy cloaks and we rode good horses; but the frost was beyond anything I have known or could imagine, and presently the trail of the army could be followed by the dead and dying it shed upon the march.

Dreadful was it to see those poor fellows, and to know that we could not help them. There they lay, some already white and still in the death sleep; others moaning for pain

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of the cold; others, again, imploring their fellows to shoot them for God's sake. All, however, passed on without pity. The wind devoured us; the snow had become a very avalanche.

Now this lasted for an hour, almost until the darkness had set in; but when it ceased we perceived, to our astonishment, a considerable town upon the horizon, and this put new life into us. Spurring our jaded horses, Léon and I galloped on, telling each other that we should certainly find bread and shelter in such a place, and that the rigour of the night could safely be defied there. We had gone, I suppose, about a third of a mile in this way when we came without warning upon a wrecked carriage, and immediately drew rein at the unexpected discovery we made therein.

II

I HAVE told you that Léon will rarely pass a pretty woman, whatever be her nationality, and when he drew rein at the sight of the wrecked carriage it was a woman's face which arrested him.

"One moment, my uncle," says he; "you really are in a devil of a hurry."

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I drew rein with him and walked my horse up to the carriage. It was plainly the equipage of a person of rank—a spacious berline, drawn by four horses, and a brilliant yellow in colour. Of more import was the fact that the coachman sat dead and frozen upon the box, and that the horses had drawn the vehicle over the bank of the road, and there left it poised as a stick upon a conjurer's finger. A minute later and it turned over gently in the snow, and the horses, maddened by the mishap, plunged frantically and went galloping across the plain. At the same moment we heard cries from within the berline, and, dismounting and leaping upon it, we took three women from the coach, of whom but one was alive. She was Valerie St. Antoine, and she recognised us immediately.

“Help, sir, for God's sake!” says she, as Léon caught her in his arms and instantly wrapped his own cloak about her. We did not tell her that the others were beyond help, yet such was the case.

Of the two, one was an elderly and distinguished-looking woman with white hair, and the second as pretty a child of fifteen years of age as I had seen since I left Prussia. Both had perished of want and cold. They were locked in each other's arms.

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and quite dead when we took them from the carriage.

"Who are these poor people?" I asked Valerie.

She buried her face in her hands.

"The Baroness de Nivois and her granddaughter. They have been five years in Moscow. They were my friends—God help me!"

"But, mademoiselle," said I, "what sent you upon such an errand as this?"

She looked at me, I think, with some amazement at my want of understanding.

"What Frenchwoman remains in Moscow now?" she asked coldly. And then as quickly she turned to Léon and inquired of him where the Emperor would be.

"I must see him immediately," says she; "it was for that I followed the army. Captain Courcelles, will you not help me?"

He replied that nothing would give him greater pleasure.

"You are returning to Paris, mademoiselle?" he asked her.

She said that it was possible.

"But," cried I, "I thought you would never leave Moscow. You told me so yourself."

"Major," she rejoined, "I did not then

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know that my father was alive, nor that he served the Emperor."

I thought upon it a minute, and then a sudden memory coming to me, I said :

"There is a Colonel St. Antoine with the Second Battalion of the Chasseurs of the Line. Is it possible, mademoiselle, that he is a relative of yours ? "

"He is my father," she said, with admirable dignity ; and, turning, she hid her face in her hands again, as though the dreadful scene about us could no longer be suffered. Léon waited for no more, but, lifting her upon his horse, he rode straightway from the place.

"Do what you can for these poor women," said he to me. "We will wait for you in the town." And with that he pressed forward and was quickly lost to my view.

I had given him my word, and yet it was worth little. The poor women were beyond all hope, and it remained but to inter them decently. This, with the aid of some sappers, I did anon, and having seen to it that we should know the place again if occasion arose, I also pressed on towards the town.

It was quite dark by this time, and the snow had begun to fall again. I thought myself lucky to overtake my nephew, which I did some third of a mile from the gates of

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the town. But whether his welcome were as warm as my pleasure I have my doubts. Let me say in all honesty that I believe that Léon was in love with this woman, and would have gone through fire and water for her.

III

THERE were many terrible nights to be suffered before the remnant of the Grand Army might see Paris again ; but none of them to surpass that night when we first made acquaintance with the north wind as Russia knows it.

What the cold was I cannot tell you, but such a rigour I had never known before, nor had any who marched with that stricken company. Already we perceived that if we did not reach the shelter of the town we should never see the day ; and the fury of the wind driving us and the snow blinding our eyes, we pressed on headlong.

Had a man doubted the road, the dead, as I have said, would have pointed it out to him. There was not a furlong free from the corpses of those who had been our comrades. Every bush sheltered poor wretches deploring their misery and appealing to God. We saw men staggering as though drunk with wine ; others

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hysterical as women and gone stark mad in their suffering. And all the time the lights of the distant town would appear and disappear, as though mocking our hope and defying us of their promise.

I was sorry for my nephew, who had given his cloak to Valerie; and although she made a pretence of sheltering them both, it was precious little good he got by it. Perhaps, had she not been with him in the saddle, he would never have come to Slawkowo at all. As it was, he bore up bravely and did not cease to encourage her in every way that he could. "But a kilometre more, and we are there," he would say. Or again: "We shall find the Emperor in the city, and there will be food and shelter there." Sometimes he would ask her if she suffered much, and invariably she answered with a woman's courage.

"Don't think of me, captain," she would say; "I am used to the cold. Have I not lived many years in Russia? All this is nothing to me."

Such courage was infectious, and we were both the better for it. It seemed possible now that we should reach the town after all, though there were many bitter interludes before we did so. Sometimes the lights would disappear altogether, and we would believe that we had

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lost our road. Then again they would appear as mysteriously, and we would think the city but a stone's throw from us. In the end, I remember, we came to a frozen river, and putting our horses across it, we found ourselves beneath high and forbidding walls, which told us that we had lost our way, and that the night might still have the better of us.

This was a terrible hour, and we rode vainly to and fro as children who are lost in an unknown country. Everywhere black walls denied us shelter, and so at last we recrossed the river and went southward a full half-hour before we discovered the gate of Slawkowo and cried to one another that all was well.

We thought it must be so.

Here was a considerable town with the houses of the merchants who had sheltered us when we rode to Moscow. We had known some pleasant days in Slawkowo on our outward journey, and I do not think it dawned upon any man that our reception would be different upon our return. Hardly had we entered the gate when we discovered our mistake. Of the once fine houses but the shell now remained. The main street was impassable by reason of guns and wagons gathered there. We turned aside to the suburb on the

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south, and found such houses as remained alive with our comrades, who filled them from garret to cellar, and swore that no new-comer should enter.

By here and there whole companies of infantry were bivouacked in the open for lack of shelter, and the high wall of church or garden alone protected them from the terrible night. Of food there seemed no prospect whatever. We beat upon the doors of many houses, and although we gave those within to understand that we were officers of the Guard, they answered that men or devils should not come in that night. At last we found ourselves at the very ramparts again with never a house in view and nothing but those monstrous walls before us.

“ Good God ! ” says Léon, drawing rein at last and turning to me wearily, “ is there no house in all this cursed city which will take us in ? ”

I could but answer him that we must wheel about and try again, and although my horse staggered at every step, and ultimately fell dead as we went, I could but repeat the admonition. We must get into a house of some sort, or we should never see the dawn. So much would have been evident to a child.

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Behold us, then, staggering on, the snow beating upon us pitilessly; the wind howling amid the shells of the ruined houses; the city itself but a mob of maddened troopers fighting for their very lives on every threshold. So evident was it that we should get no shelter anywhere in the vicinity of the gates that we pushed on ultimately as though we would leave Slawkowo by the western road, and then for the first time we were able to breathe freely and to reckon with the situation.

There were no houses at all here—merely the blackened ruins of once fine streets. Often we rode over heaps of rubbish with the sure knowledge that a mishap might send us headlong into some vault or cellar, already, it may be, full of dead. This, however, did not deter us; we had Valerie to save, and the same thought inspired us both. There could be no rest for either until Valerie St. Antoine had found a refuge. How shall I tell you what we ourselves suffered, buffeted this way and that; drawn now to some phantom house; anon to the borders of the frozen river, and from that back again to the wilderness? Certainly I thought that all was ended, and the deadly spell of the cold seizing upon me, I began to have that desire of sleep from which there can be no awakening.

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"Nephew," said I, "do you go on and leave me here."

It was then that my horse fell, and rolling heavily in the snow I thought that my end had come. Léon, however, had a flask of brandy in his haversack, and presently I was conscious of a burning sensation in my throat and of a sudden realisation of the truth that I must wake or die. Making a mighty effort of the will, I got upon my feet and struggled on, hardly knowing that Valerie St. Antoine had one of my arms and Léon the other. The words they spoke to me were as sounds from afar; I did not rightly understand them, and made no reply. But presently, a little strength coming back to me, I heard a note of distant music, and asked them what it was.

"Listen to that," said I. "Someone is playing the organ."

They laughed at me, Léon saying, "Come, come, uncle, your ears are playing tricks with you; there is no organ here."

"You are wrong," said I; "there is an organ, and someone is playing 'On va leur percer les flancs.' Listen and you will hear it."

Well, they both stood and listened, and after a few moments they admitted I was right.

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"There is someone playing," said Léon, while Valerie uttered a little cry of pleasure, and running forward with her hands clasped, she returned to tell us that it must be the organ of a church and that we should never hear it on such a night if it were not very near to us. On this we all agreed, and a new hope animating us, we led Léon's horse and pressed on towards the music.

Ah, what a quest that was! How those phantom chords deceived us! Sometimes we would think the organ was so near us that nothing but a miracle could hide the scene. Then again we would lose the sounds altogether, and try to comfort each other with the assurance that the wind alone muffled them. This went on for a full half-hour, until as though a miracle had happened, we found ourselves in the very porch of a considerable church, and understood in a moment that our own fellows were within, and that one of them was playing upon the organ.

"Open to the Guard!" cried Léon, beating heavily upon the door with the hilt of his sword.

The answer from within was the one we had heard so often that night: "Let the Guard go elsewhere, there is no room for anybody here."

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"Oh," says Léon, "is that not Sergeant Bourgogne who is speaking?"

It was a lucky shot, for the door was opened instantly, and there stood our old sergeant before us.

"Why, captain," cried he, "we have reported you for dead!" And then espying me, he added, "The very man we are looking for, major. There is plenty of work for a surgeon to do in this place. Come in, messieurs, and let me bolt the door after you."

Needless to say, we did not ask for a second invitation, but passing at once into the church, we heard the sergeant bolting and locking the heavy door. There the light almost blinded us, and we sank exhausted upon the stone pavement and lay motionless for many minutes.

IV

WHEN we had recovered ourselves a little we were able to get some idea of the strange happenings within the church.

To begin with, I would tell you that it was a building in the Russian fashion, with two domes above its naves and a similar one above the chancel. About the wall there were the icons which the Russians worship, and the

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organ which we had heard played stood in the western gallery just above the main doors. The building was large, and would have accommodated a thousand people perhaps. There must have been five hundred of our own fellows within when we entered, and they lay about the marble pavement in every conceivable attitude.

Some, I perceived, were already drunk with brandy, of which there was a considerable supply in the church. I learned from Sergeant Bourgogne that the cellars of a neighbouring wine shop had been ransacked before dark fell and many bottles of wine and brandy carried into the church against the bitter night. Of food there was none but horseflesh, and despite my nephew's protests, the troopers killed and cut up his own charger directly we entered the building. Soon the whole place was redolent with the smell of roasted flesh, and what with the pungent odour of that and of the burning wood and brandy the atmosphere became almost insupportable.

I should tell you that two great fires had been lighted in the building: one upon the pavement of the chancel, the other below the choir screen, which is a great thing in all their churches.

Unhappily the fire before the altar had

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been fed chiefly by the beautiful painted panels of this screen, while that in the nave owed its glowing heat to the multitude of chairs which had been broken up and burned upon it. Here all the cooking was done, and it was an odd thing to see men toasting great lumps of horseflesh upon the points of their bayonets and swords, and eating them while they were still hot and dripping from the fire. Such practices, however, went on uninterruptedly; and if anything be said against them, I would remind you of the intolerable night outside and of what these poor fellows had suffered during their march to Slawkowo. For that matter we ourselves were not above sharing in this barbarous hospitality, and even Valerie St. Antoine ate a piece of roasted horseflesh and drank a draught of wine from the flask which Sergeant Bourgogne proffered her.

Be it said that the men were very merry and that a spirit of drunken hilarity prevailed in the place. None seemed to remember that it was a holy building, nor would it have been worth while to remonstrate with poor devils who had suffered so much. I saw usually sober officers dancing in the vestments of the priests and preaching mock sermons from a splendid pulpit. The organist was an accom-

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plished fellow, and played the wildest dance with precision. Even the wounded cheered up at his music and tried to join in the songs which the army knew so well. It was pitiful to hear them moaning :

“Ram, ram, ram, tam,
Plan, tire-lire ram plan”:

those who would never see France again and might never quit that building.

One such I shall never forget. His leg had been amputated that very day, and yet in his drunken frenzy he reared himself up from the rude bed they had made him and rolled over and over until he was dead, like a mad dervish from the Indies. Scenes like this were repeated during that long and wonderful night, until, indeed, the organist, coming down the stairs for brandy, stumbled by the way and pitched headlong into the nave. Both his legs were broken, and although I did what I could for him, I knew that he, too, would never leave Slawkowo.

Valerie St. Antoine supported all this with wonderful fortitude. We had had little converse with her hitherto, but now she began to talk to us very rationally, and we had some insight into that dual personality which many men have found so interesting.

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Very frankly she told us that she had had no thought of returning to France until she had heard that her father was with the army. This was the more surprising since it would appear that she had not seen him since she was quite a child.

“He left Nice in the days of the Terror,” she said. “We went—my brother and I—with my mother to Leipsic, and then to one of her kinsmen, who was a Pole. She died in Poland five years ago, and my brother had to enter Prince Nicholas’s household and to take me to Moscow with him. You will imagine what happened to a child among a strange people and with none but an absent brother to protect her. René was sent to St. Petersburg, and I was left alone with the Prince. Sometimes I forgot altogether that I had been born in France. They surrounded me with riches, and anything for which I chose to ask was at my hand. Then came the story of General Bonaparte and of his victories. That did not interest me; I was still a Russian at heart, and remained so until your army entered Moscow and all was remembered. It was the Emperor who set me dreaming again and made me remember my home by the Mediterranean Sea: I recalled my father in his uniform of green and gold; I recollected

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how we were taught as children to cry, '*Vive la République!*' but never '*Vive le Roi!*' Oh, yes, my heart went back to France and I became a Frenchwoman again. Now I shall go to Paris and try to earn my living there. It will be difficult, but I am not afraid; the world has taught me too many things that I should fear my own independence."

Léon told her gallantly enough that she had no need to fear any such thing. He, I made sure, was ready enough to set her upon the road of his choice; and yet there was something about the girl which forbade love-making as soldiers know it, and set her upon a pinnacle of which even my nephew was a little shy.

"Come to Paris," said he, "and you shall be as famous as any woman in the city. There is always a career for beauty there, and you, Valerie, have other gifts. I promise you that you will not be disappointed. I will make it my business to see that you are not."

She looked at him with curiosity. Perhaps there was a measure of pity in her tone when she said, "Ah, Captain Léon, if we ever see Paris again how lucky we shall be!"

This she said from her heart, and it saddened us all not a little when we perceived

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how true it was. None the less, Léon tried to laugh at it.

“There will be supplies at Smolensk,” said he, “and after that the way will be easy. We shall be hungry for a day or two and perhaps eat some of your old friends the Cossacks—but the Grand Army has a good appetite. The Emperor will not have been unprepared for such weather as this, and you will see how he will deal with it. Really, Mademoiselle Valerie, you were never born to be a pessimist.”

She shook her head, but her interest was evidently roused when he mentioned the Emperor.

“Where is His Majesty now?” she asked. “Do you not remember that I must see him at once? It is for that that I left Moscow with the Baroness Nivois. The safety of the army may depend upon what I have to tell him. I appeal to you all to help me.”

“We shall do that readily enough,” said I, chiming in for the first time. “Nothing could be easier. His Majesty is at Slawkowo this very night. You can see him in the morning before the march begins—that is, if you have anything to say to him to which he will listen.”

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She smiled as though with some contempt at the doubt.

“I have that,” said she, “which will save his army. If he does not see me, he is not the person I believe him to be.”

And then to us all she said :

“Messieurs, I have the plans of General Kutusoff, as I read them in Prince Nicholas’s house. Do you not think your Emperor will wish to see those ? ”

We were all greatly interested, and begged her to show us the documents. Here, however, she was adamantine, and her native secrecy prevailed. To our questions she answered that she would tell the Emperor alone, and soon we perceived that it was futile to press her. Indeed, had we the mind, that was not the opportunity, for just as we were at the height of the argument a loud knocking was heard upon the doors of the church, and someone cried out that the Cossacks were without.

Now this was a dreadful thing to hear, and one which sent every man in the church leaping to his feet—those of them who could stand, for there were many who could not. We did not stop to ask ourselves by what means the Russians had entered Slawkowo. Well we knew that they had been upon our

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flanks all day, and it did not seem impossible that they had made a sudden descent upon the church, and were already in the suburbs of the city. If that were so, our case was parlous. We knew that they would burn us out like rats, and would sabre every man who crossed the threshold. Can you wonder, then, that a great silence fell for an instant, and was succeeded by a wild shout of "Aux armes !"

I have lived through many a dangerous hour for the Emperor's sake, but never one, I think, so full of the sublime and the grotesque as that instant of alarm in the church at Slawkowo.

To see men, who had been brawling and singing but a moment before, spring to their feet and stagger towards the door, bayonets fixed or swords flourished ; to hear the oaths and curses of drunken brutes, who believed that death had them by the shoulders ; to be carried everywhere in a mob which slashed and hewed at an imaginary enemy, and even cut down its comrades in a mad debauch of fear and frenzy—all this, I say, surpassed experience.

Yet such was the result of that wild alarm.

The Cossacks were at the gates ; the church was fired. From without and within the roar

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and the brawl waxed deafening. Those in the snow beat fiercely upon the doors, and splintered them with axe and musket; those within fired their pistols from every window, and called on God and the devil to help them. When it was apparent that the doors were giving way, a panic ensued such as the meanest mercenary might have been ashamed of. Men howled in fear or supplicated an enemy still invisible; others flew to the bottle, and drank prodigious draughts; some capered like women round and round the fires in a drunken pæan of death. But all surely believed that the Cossacks were there; and we of the Guard, determining at length that assault was better than defence, threw the doors wide open and charged headlong through the blinding storm.

Ah! what a night that was — what a mockery! Perceived but not seeing, for the auricle of light must have shown our figures clearly to the enemy, we slashed and hewed at hazard — here in snow to our knees, there falling upon the slippery ground, now locked arm in arm with the aggressors, or again standing alone seeking vainly for an enemy.

Whence the assault had come or by whom we knew no more than the dead.

Either the light blinded us or we stood in

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such black darkness that a man might have slain his own brother unawares.

In truth, we had been doing this all along, and we must have fought a full ten minutes before someone cried out that we were killing Frenchmen, and instantly there arose a terrible uproar and the ghastly truth was discovered.

It had not been the Cossacks at all who had come to the place, but a regiment of chasseurs of the line, of whom no fewer than forty now lay dead before the porch of the church. Who can describe our chagrin and dismay when this was made known? Our own comrades! Many a man there would as soon have slain his own children.

V

WELL, we dragged brands from the fire and began to do what we could. Many of the poor fellows were dead, and the snow fell so heavily that their bodies were already but whitened mounds. Others crawled here and there in their pain, fearing the vengeance of the Russians whom they believed to be in the church. When we cried out to them that we were Frenchmen, they could hardly believe their ears. How they reproached us then,

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and how difficult we found it to answer them ! Few words, indeed, were spoken ; but, dragging the wounded and even the dead into the building, we began our pitiful task.

Naturally, my own services were much in request. There was another surgeon from the *Vélites* of the company, but he was a very young man, and the situation had unnerved him. The mischief of it was that so many had been attacked with sword and bayonet that the wounds we had to deal with were very terrible. One poor fellow I remember particularly—a fine man of more than middle age in a cloak and colonel's uniform, an officer of the *chasseurs à pied*, who tried to make light of his wounds, but evidently was dying. Someone told me presently that his name was St. Antoine, and it came to me in a flash that he might be Valerie's father.

Now, it became very difficult to know what to do. The girl herself was then helping the wounded upon the far side of the church, but she came over to me presently, and I had no alternative but to tell her what had been said. The man was dying, and, if he were her father, then she must know it.

I shall not attempt to recite the moving scene I was now to witness—a scene between a child who had become the woman of the

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world and a man who had lost his daughter to find her at the hour of his death ! Be sure we did what we could for him, giving him the best place by the fire, and cloaks from willing shoulders, and brandy from the flask which was left to us. It was all of no avail, and he died just as the dawn broke and the distant bugles were sounding the *réveillé*.

Valerie's grief was not such as I had expected to see.

There are some women, however, whose souls no man can read, and hers was such a one. What she suffered in that hour I make no pretence to say, but her anger against those who had killed their fellow-countrymen was typical of a passionate nature. This Grand Army now stood to her for a thing of contempt. She railed upon us piteously—applauding our skill in killing Frenchmen and running away from Russians. When, to turn her thoughts, Léon told her that she would now find the Emperor in Slawkowo, she derided the idea that she wished to see him, and taking some papers from her breast she burned them before we could raise a finger to stop her.

“Your army shall perish !” she cried almost triumphantly ; and then she asked, “Well, what does it deserve ? To kill your

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comrades ! My God — to kill my own father ! ”

Her courage was no longer capable of supporting this thought, and she sank down upon the pavement and was overtaken by passionate weeping, which endured for many minutes.

The destruction of the documents had been so swift that its moment hitherto had not occurred to us, but now I took Léon aside and began to question him.

“ The papers came from Kutusoff,” said I. “ They are of the greatest importance, and possibly the Russian plan of campaign is among them. Certainly the Emperor should know of this ; we must make it our business to go to him immediately. If the woman has burned the documents, at least she will have read them. We must make her speak at headquarters.”

He agreed with me, but declared that she was in no fit state to tell a story.

“ I know the kind,” he said. “ Her anger is like a tempest, and will pass as quickly. Then she will regret what she has done. Let us go to head-quarters and report. It will be for them to act in the matter.”

I thought this wise at the time, and did not hesitate to set off with him. It was

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evident that the Russians had prepared some great plan of campaign the moment our retreat was known, and the importance of this to the general staff could not be exaggerated. It was amazing to think that a mere child amidst us had knowledge which might save the lives of thousands of men, and that the papers which contained it were but so many ashes upon the pavement before us. None the less, we might yet compel her to speak, and with this in our minds we quitted the building and made our way as best we could to the guest house at which the Emperor was staying.

This was no light task, for the snow was often up to our knees, and the dead were everywhere.

It had been a terrible night, and the army had paid a bitter price for the ruin it had inflicted upon Slawkowo on the outward journey. We could not help but reflect how many thousands might have been saved in those houses we had burned, how many might have been fed by that food we had so wantonly destroyed in the days of our abundance. This day there was not a loaf of bread in all that perished town; men were eating horse at every bivouac. The night, for those who lived, had been an orgy amid the cellars, when men raved and died in their drunkenness, and

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those who perished from starvation had nothing but brandy for their lips.

All this was reflected in that scene at dawn.

Day broke with a wan, grey light and a powder of snow which burned the skin like hot needles. We found the great street of the town still blocked by the wagons of the transport and the guns of the Emperor's Guard. The bravest men moved like phantoms in the mist, their spirits sunk, their flesh shrunken by the cold. None of the *éclat* of departure was to be observed in all that throng. The road had carried us to a house of death, and no hope lay beyond it. Who shall wonder at the dejection which fell upon the once proud Grand Army?

We came up to the Emperor's tent at nine o'clock, and heard that His Majesty was just about to march. Murat and Dumesnil were with him, and I was lucky enough to catch the latter when he came out of the Emperor's room some ten minutes later. My story interested him profoundly, and we were soon ushered into His Majesty's presence. I thought he looked a little careworn, but there was no betrayal of his secret thoughts, nor did he speak a word in reference to the thousands of dead who lay buried beneath the snow in that wretched town. Indeed, his manner be-

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came almost a little aggressive when he spoke and asked me somewhat surlily what I wanted.

“Your Majesty,” said I, “there is a woman in the city who has news from the Russian head-quarters. I thought you would wish to hear of her.”

“Is she with you?” he asked quickly, the wonderful eyes searching me from head to foot.

I had to say that she was not, and at that his choler mounted.

“Then why do you come here? Why do you waste my time? Go and fetch her immediately. You must be a fool to come upon such an errand.”

I had been an old favourite of his, and it came to me that he would not have spoken in this way had the situation been less terrible. His anger reflected his disappointment and would not suffer argument. I did not attempt to tell him the true story of Valerie St. Antoine, for to that he would never have listened in such a temper; but, promising to fetch her immediately, I was about to leave the room, when he said:

“Let there be no mistake. If you do not find her I will have you shot.”

I heard him with amazement, for never had such words been spoken to me before.

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Yet I knew the Little Corporal well enough not to doubt his meaning. He had realised the importance of the tidings I carried, and his anger at our supposed neglect prompted the threat. If this did not alarm me it was because I trusted Valerie, and so well did my confidence seem to be justified that Léon laughed when he heard the story.

“I know women,” said he. “She would do anything for me. We will just tell her all the circumstances, and she will come immediately. Cheer up, mon oncle; I shall not have to dig a bullet out of you at dawn to-morrow.”

Truthfully, I did not believe that he would, but I was a little anxious none the less, and we returned to the church at our best speed.

When we got there we found the building empty of all save its wounded and its dead. Of Valerie there was not a trace, nor of the colonel, her father. For a little while I could not realise the importance of this nor understand wholly what it meant to me. When the truth came it was as though a man had clapped a pistol to my head and cried that I must die. Good God, what would my case be if we could not find her? Even Léon was moved; I could see that he had begun to tremble.

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VI

“MON oncle,” said he, “she cannot be gone far; let us get some of our men and search for her. Valerie will never leave the army at such a time. We must find her without delay.”

I perceived that it was the only thing to be done, and, going out of the church with him, we began our search, which was to end so disastrously.

There was no street, house, nor cellar within a quarter of a mile of the place that we did not ransack to its depths. I have always been liked by the Guard, and many a good fellow proffered his help in such an emergency. Soon, I think, there must have been fifty of us crying the tidings far and wide and asking, “Have you seen the Frenchwoman named St. Antoine?” The astonishing thing was that we did not meet a human being who could help us by a word. None had seen Valerie; few thought that they would recognise her if they did see her.

“Possibly,” said one, “she has gone to the guest house in the main street of the town.” Another suggested that she might have set out with the advance guard which left just after dawn. But all agreed that she was not

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to be found, and when noon came and there were still no tidings of her, then I began to believe that she would never be found at all. This was a disaster so unlooked for, so terrible, that it paralysed every faculty I possessed. To die for a woman's temper, I said, while even my friends began to admit that I was in grave danger. When I met an aide-de-camp to General Dumesnil a little later in the afternoon, he told me that His Majesty was still waiting, but that his anger had not modified.

"By heaven," said he, "he will have you shot, major, if you do not find her."

I could only answer that I had done my best and was still doing it. It occurred to me that, after all, Valerie might return to the church eventually, and, telling every man I knew that I was going there, I sought out that now deserted building, and made myself its prisoner. What hours they were—what hours of waiting, of hope, and of fear! From the distance I could hear the rumble of the guns and the murmur of a great army moving, but the church itself was as silent as the dead and filled with the ghosts of yesterday. In the end the night came and found me still watching. I did not dare to return to headquarters. Even Léon did not come back to me.

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Well, a man dies but once, they say, and yet I died many deaths that night.

Often I rebuked myself that Léon was one of the few to whom I had not committed my intention of returning to the church, and a little after ten o'clock I set out to seek for him. This walk took me back to the main street of the town, and eventually to the very building wherein I had seen His Majesty that morning. Such a fact, if it is to be explained at all, must be set down to the magnetism of fate, which destroys men as well as animals. The rabbit, they say, is fascinated by the snake, and so was I by that intolerable uncertainty which I could not support in the stillness of the church. I must know the truth, I thought: I must see the Emperor again, if I were ordered out for execution there and then—well, a more terrible death might await me on the frozen plain beyond the town. "Have done with it," was my idea, as I pushed my way up the steps and asked if His Majesty was still there.

Well, it was a fearful ordeal. A young officer carried in my message and bade me wait at the door until he returned. It mattered not where it was. I do not think I was conscious of the time, the place, or of anything but the issue. Should I be summoned to that

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magic presence or should I not? Would the penalty be death? Few know what a man suffers who lives through such moments as these; few can understand the sudden reaction which attends the truth, whatever it be.

“His Majesty left at one o’clock,” said the orderly when he returned.

The truth staggered me, and I reeled as at a blow.

“Did His Majesty leave alone?” I asked.

“No,” said the fellow, and here he smiled; “there was a woman with him.”

Pah, my friends, what a coward I had been, and how I cursed the weary hours I had spent alone in that hole of a church!

CHAPTER V

THE CAMP BY THE RIVER

I

THERE were two days of cold, clear weather after we left Slawkowo. It was upon the second of these days that the adventure of which I shall now speak befell me.

The sufferings which the army endured had not by any means abated at this time. We found but scant supplies in the town, and there had not been that distribution of rations we had expected. It is true that the first-comers pillaged brandy from the cellars of Slawkowo, but this was poor sustenance for men whose greatest necessity was bread, and in this respect we quitted the town as poor as we entered it. Our one consolation was that the north winds no longer nipped us and the snow had ceased to fall. Just as heretofore, men devoured the horses that fell by the way and drank their blood greedily. Nay, we were in no way surprised when we heard that the Croats were devouring each other, and the cruel

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tales of our comrades' sufferings which were told at every bivouac could readily be believed.

Naturally, only the bravest kept their courage through such an ordeal. The cunning we had with us, and they went stoutly enough because of their cunning. There will always be men who are able to get food while others starve, and in such the Grand Army was not deficient. These happy fellows kept their secrets for the most part, and would often pretend to take pot-luck with us, while we knew all the time that they had hidden stores in which we did not share. The fact led to bitterness sometimes, and such men were shunned by their fellows as unworthy of the spirit of comradeship which animated the Guard.

I met more than one of these cormorants after we left Slawkowo, but none whose conduct so much mystified me as that of Captain Payard of the dragoons. In converse he was the best of good fellows—a merry, curly-haired gentleman, whose eyes were as blue as a woman's and whose smile was medicine for every ill. Payard pretended to eat horse with us, and yet we knew that this could not be his staple diet, for he was as fat as a Normandy lamb and as gay. Many tried to guess his secret, but none discovered it, and he would

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have carried it back to Paris with him but for a bottle of brandy I hoarded at my saddle-bow, and opened on the night we left Slaw-kowo. So deeply did he drink of this that he became quite tipsy, and, crouching by my side over the bivouac fire in the wood, he told me his story without shame.

“ You all say that I live well,” he protested. “ True enough ; but, bon camarade, I steal from the Russians.”

“ What ? ” cried I. “ You are known to them, then ? ”

He laughed at the idea of treachery.

“ Do you not know me better than that, major ? ” said he, his eyes flashing in the crimson light. “ I tell you that I go to the Russian camp and steal what I want. Is it not very simple, and should you not all have thought of it for yourselves ? ”

I was very much surprised, and began to question him closely. How had he got the password ? Was it not a highly dangerous undertaking, and had he not been fortunate to escape with his life ?

All this he treated lightly. There was danger, of course, but what is danger to men who are dying of starvation ? He admitted that he had a friend among the Russians, but declared very stoutly that such friendship had

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been of great service both to him and to the Emperor. Finally, he said :

“Come with me, major, and bring your nephew, and we will dine among the Cossacks to-morrow night. Are you prepared to take your chance? Very well. We will start a little before sunset, and we can rejoin the column on the following morning. Come now, and I promise you as good a dinner as you could get in our own Paris this night.”

The request astonished me very much, and I thought upon it a little while. Léon had been away inspecting the horses, but when he returned I mentioned the matter to him, and he did not hesitate a moment. Of course we must go. Did it not promise us an adventure, and was not anything better than the starvation we suffered? I think, indeed, he would have leapt from a mountain-top if there had been food at the bottom; and even at my age I could ask myself what perils counted for men who marched daily over the bodies of their comrades to a city of visions.

II

Now this was all very well, but, in truth, the affair was rash enough to have satisfied the most reckless.

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Remember that we marched like a beaten army, dejected and without spirit; thousands dying every day as we went: the road across the snows black with the bodies of our comrades who had fallen. Only the spirit which had conquered at Austerlitz and Jena prevented our swift annihilation by the Russian wolves, who barked at us from every thicket. If a man lost his way, the sabres of the Cossacks quickly showed him the road, or the hatchets of the peasantry put an end to his sufferings. And yet this laughing Payard could propose that we should brave the fastnesses of these savages just to find a good dinner beyond them—a soldier's invitation, surely, perhaps a madman's project.

I shall not dwell upon this aspect of the adventure, for it must be apparent to all. Whatever misgivings I had at dawn passed away as the day waxed and waned and the pangs of a savage hunger devoured me at nightfall. A starving man is no better than a starving dog when he is famished, and the Vélites were becoming but animals these latter days. So you will not wonder that Payard found us ready when he called us at sunset and that we set off as willingly as lads from a school. We were going to dine for the first time since we had quitted Moscow. Happy

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pilgrims upon a gourmet's road—how little we knew what was in store for us!

I should tell you here that the regiment had chosen but a bleak place for its bivouac that night; a night when the wind began to blow again and the moon shone clear in a starlit heaven. The road crossed a shallow valley, in the midst of which was a frozen river. The banks of this were not high enough to give much shelter from the bitter blasts, but such as it was our men availed themselves of it and lay in the hollows by the water, without fires, since the woods were some miles away to the south, and there was not a human habitation to be seen. When all that could be done for the good fellows had been accomplished, and those who perished of fatigue were carried out of sight of the living, Payard called to Léon and myself and we set off briskly over the frozen waste. The time to dine had arrived, though as yet we knew nothing of that strange café in the wilderness which should harbour us.

"It is an hour's ride from here," said Payard as he mounted his horse; "nothing at all, my friends, and no Cossacks until we come to the woods. Then we shall be ready for them. *En avant, mes amis*, I am going to feed you well."

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With this he set off at a brisk trot and we followed him without protest. The way lay in the valley of the river I have mentioned, and we followed it for at least two miles until the bank rose more steeply and afforded no longer a safe footing for our horses.

Nevertheless, we pressed on until the woods drew down to the water's edge, and Payard declared that we had need of horses no longer. From this time, as he quickly told us, we must go afoot for safety's sake ; and tethering the willing animals to the first of the trees about the river's border, we entered the forest.

III

OUR confidence was wonderful. We knew no more than the dead where this merry fellow was leading us, and yet we followed him as joyous adventurers upon the gayest of pilgrimages. When we heard a distant bugle and surmised that we were not far from the Russian camp, we were still unable to check his headlong advance, and though it was difficult to imagine that he knew the country, our questions concerning it were asked in vain.

"A la bonne heure," he would say when checking his step. "I have promised you a

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good dinner, and I am taking you where you will get it. Do not trouble me until we arrive at the house. Then I will talk to you."

To this he added the intimation that it was dangerous to talk in a place where the trees had ears. "Do you wish to dine with the Cossacks?" he asked us. It was a question we could answer very decidedly in the negative.

Had we any doubt upon the latter point the sound of galloping horses would have made his request for prudence seem reasonable enough. It was evident that he was still following the river bank and that this was his only guide. The woods about were open and gloriously carpeted by the glistening snow. The long stems of the pines, all whitened by the frost, stood for so many sleeping sentinels of that hidden army of Russians which lay beyond them. Yet he did not hesitate, and it was only when the sounds of approaching horsemen drew quite near to us that Payard plunged suddenly into the undergrowth above the river bank and bade us follow him for our lives.

"The Cossacks!" cried he, and that was a word we understood too well.

They came up presently, a sturdy troop all frosted with the snow, but talking very

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merrily together as men who had been upon a pleasant picnic. I had no doubt that they had just visited one of our own bivouacs, and it was hard to lie there and watch them, knowing that they had sabred many an honest Frenchman that day. Yet prudence dictated such a course, and we lay in the brushwood hardly daring to breathe while they swept by. When they had gone, Payard crawled out of the bush, and shaking the snow from his massive shoulders, he told us pleasantly that we were going to dine with them.

"The camp is a third of a mile from here," he said, "and dinner will be waiting. Let us make haste, my friends, or it will be cold."

It was all an enigma to us, you may be sure, but that was not the time to interrogate him about it, and we were content to follow in his steps while he pressed on through the wood and presently emerged upon a considerable clearing, beyond which were the bivouac fires of the Russians. The sight of this brought us to a halt, and all gathering together at the foot of a great chestnut tree, we began to argue about it for the first time.

"Yonder is the village of Vitzala," says Payard, indicating some lights far off through the trees. "There has been a Russian camp here under General Volska for the last two

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months. Madame Pauline is in the first house across the clearing. If we reach that safely, the rest is easy. Her husband has gone to Petersburg, and we are not likely to be troubled by him. Of course, you know that she is a Frenchwoman."

We knew nothing of the kind. As a matter of fact, we had heard her name for the first time, but not with astonishment. It was evident from the beginning that he had formed a friendship with one of the many Frenchwomen who marched out of Moscow with our army; but that we should find her in such a place and camped with Cossacks who were sabring our fellows was a surprise indeed.

"What brings her here?" I asked him bluntly enough.

He told me in a word.

"Colonel Tcharnhoff of the dragoons is in love with her. He is supposed to be the richest man in the Russian army; his regiment lies yonder in the village, but he himself has gone north to meet the Military Council. I promise you that you are about to meet a very fine woman—and one who knows how to dine," he added with a laugh.

His candour disarmed us. We knew these Frenchwomen too well to doubt his story, and all that remained was to discover the house

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which harboured this interesting lady. Payard said that he had been instructed to follow the bank of the river until he came to the clearing, and that this would bring him to an isolated cabin upon the outskirts of the village. There he was to find Madame Pauline. The direction was plain, but the darkness of the night rendered the pursuit of it difficult.

We were now within a few hundred paces of the Russian camp. There was a wide lake of snow between ourselves and the sheltering thicket, and it was apparent that any moment might discover our presence to the Russians. More prudent men would have gone back as they had come; but we were as famished as the wolves, and crying to the captain to lead on, we bent our heads and ran boldly for the shelter of the distant woods.

Luck favoured us to this point. Standing upon the far side of the thicket to listen, we soon perceived that the camp was not alarmed. It is true that we could see the bayonets of the sentries moving between the trees, perhaps a hundred yards from the place where we stood; but a far more pleasant sight was a lonely wattled hut on the very brink of the wood, and this we determined could be no other than Madame Pauline's abode.

“As plain as the nose on the end of your

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face, and a much better colour," said Payard, rubbing his own vigorously. "She would never have sent for me if her house had been within the lines. At any rate, my friends, I will take my chance," and upon that he walked straight up to the door of this strange habitation and knocked lightly upon it. The next moment it was opened by a man who answered him in French; and beckoning us to follow, the merry captain entered the hut without another word.

IV

I HAVE described this building as a hut, and yet when we entered it we discovered that it deserved a better appellation.

The relic of an ancient outpost in the woods, it had been used formerly by the frontier guards, and, indeed, I have learned since that it served for officers' quarters in the days of the great Queen Catherine.

The building that we saw from the thicket was but an ante-chamber to a larger apartment which had been furnished in the oddest manner for madame's occupation.

A great stove glowed here, and the walls were hung with the costliest skins in lieu of tapestries. For carpet there was but a

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footing of straw rushes, and this was in odd contrast to the luxury elsewhere. Better to our liking was a wooden table, lacking a cloth, but spread with food such as we had not seen since we left Moscow.

Bread was here—that bread for which we would have bartered our souls yesterday. We espied a great round of beef which would have fed a company of men, and a saucepan of potatoes, steaming upon the stove of which I have spoken. Not only this, but dainties innumerable littered madame's board; and our eyes feasted already upon the preserved fruits which every Russian loves; sweetmeats from Germany, fine liqueurs and bottles of wine, all promising a veritable orgy to men who had suffered the rigours of that unnameable retreat.

Naturally, Léon and I thought of these things first, but presently we heard a voice from a room beyond, and madame herself now appeared and greeted us with a welcome which nothing could have surpassed. Were we not Frenchmen, and was she not our sister in the remote wilderness? Be not astonished that we kissed her upon both cheeks as though we had known her all our lives.

Let me describe this wonderful personage for you as well as memory permits. Above

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the middle height, with a superb figure and limbs which would not have disgraced a grenadier, she wore the green uniform of the Cossacks of the Guard, and mighty well it became her, as we all agreed.

Not a beautiful woman as the canons go ; her hair was frankly red, though cut short and hardly reaching to her shoulders ; yet there was a power of character in her face which none could mistake, and she had the kindest smile that I have ever seen upon a woman's face. To us her welcome was unqualified.

"You are at home here, my friends," she said ; "are you not all Frenchmen, and am I not your sister ? Ah, how well I know what you have suffered ! Would that I could bring the others here to this mean house and give them what they deserve ! Such as it is, however, my hospitality is always at the service of yourselves and your comrades. Shall we now sit down to table ? You will not tell me that you are not ready."

We told her nothing of the kind, but followed her as dogs that hear the huntsman's step. The peril of the house, the chance of our being discovered there, the consequence of such discovery, troubled us not at all. We could have taken the meat in our hands and

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gnawed it as hounds will gnaw a bone, and I would say that there could have been no more revolting spectacle than that of our appetites at madame's hospitable board. Nothing came amiss to us—meat and drink; sweetmeats and liqueurs—we devoured them in a frenzy, and not until we had gorged ourselves shamelessly did a man of us put a question as to our situation.

Oddly enough, madame heard us with some discomfort, I thought, directly we began to speak about the regiment. Turning to Payard, she said :

“ My friend, do you not understand that I am the wife of a Russian officer, and can tell you nothing ? I have promised you shelter in this house, and you may count upon me ; but do not expect me to betray anything or anybody. Rather let me fill your glasses and drink the toast that I shall propose to you : ‘ France, our own beloved country. To our safe return ! ’ Will you not pledge that ? ”

Naturally we responded with all our hearts to such a pleasant sentiment ; nay, I think we had drunk the toast at least three times when, without warning, the French servant burst into the room, and, white as death, he cried, “ Madame, here is Colonel Tcharnhoff returned ! ”

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V

Now, I do not think at the first we understood the significance of this intrusion.

Remember that we had dined very well, and that our heads were turned by the good wine madame had offered us. Perhaps we had forgotten that we were in the heart of the enemy's camp, and that for a word they would have cut us to pieces. I remembered vaguely that Payard had spoken of a certain Tcharnhoff as one of madame's lovers; but for the moment it was difficult to connect the terror of the serving man with the gossip of the roadside.

In the same spirit my nephew Léon laughed foolishly when he heard the servant, and immediately cried, "Let Colonel Tcharnhoff come in!" This cry Payard himself repeated, banging the table with his fist and seeming to think it the best of jokes. Madame alone rebuked us by her attitude. I have never seen a woman so obviously overcome by terror and yet so much mistress of herself.

"Keep your seats," she said, half rising as she spoke. "Say nothing until I have told him." And with that she stood erect at the head of the table and waited for the colonel to enter.

Her attitude sobered us. The tragic terror

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of the woman, her fine determination, the splendid figure she cut there at the table's head, were so many rebukes upon our foolish levity. Instantly we realised that we were in deadly peril by the advent of this unknown man, and turning as he entered, we scrutinised him closely.

Ferdinand Tcharnhoff was then in his thirty-fifth year. They say that if you scratch a Russian you will find a Tartar; but this fellow was an Eastern from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, and no man could have mistaken him. Bearded like a savage Englishman, his face might have been that of an animal, and his cunning eyes those of a pig. He wore the white uniform of the dragoons with their cloak and helmet, and his sword was still unbuckled when he came in. Never shall I forget the look of astonishment which crossed the man's face when he beheld us at his table.

"How?" he cried in his own tongue, and then he looked from us to madame and round about at his servants as though fearing that a trap had been laid for him. It was at this moment that madame advanced, both her hands outstretched in welcome, and laughing with the wit of a born actress.

"These are my friends and relatives from

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Paris," she cried. "I am feeding them, Ferdinand. I told you that I would do so if ever I had the chance."

It was a bold stroke and worthy of the woman. The man himself seemed quite taken aback at her hardihood, and, acting in the same spirit, he now made us a most profound bow and then handed his cloak and sword to the servant.

"Gentlemen," said he, in passable French, "I will not say 'Welcome to my board!' for that is obviously too late. Let me trust that you have enjoyed a good dinner, an occupation in which I hope to imitate you with madame's permission."

He looked at her, and she immediately gave her orders for food to be brought. I think she had expected a different turn to the adventure, and was as perplexed as we ourselves at the colonel's attitude. Here was a man who should have been raging against us as spies, sitting by us in the most affable mood and eating and drinking as though he were in our house and not we in his. For all that I doubted him even in his most condescending moments, and whispering a word to Léon, I suggested that we should go. This brought suspicion to a head. The Russian became sullen in an instant.

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“You will stay,” he said, and he banged the table with his fist as though he had leapt suddenly to the command. “You will stay, messieurs. Are you not madame’s guests? This is no time of night to be in the woods. There are dangers abroad, messieurs—and wolves. Upon my word, I am surprised at you—to mention such a thing.”

We resumed our seats, and he fell to smiling again; yet it was with the snarl of one of those very wolves he had mentioned. A low cunning laugh, the like of which I have never heard, betrayed a deeper purpose than that of hospitality. We, in our turn, understood then the whole peril of the situation. The man was playing with us as a cat with mice; he had but begun the rôle he meant to undertake.

“You are foolish, messieurs,” he went on presently; “indeed most foolish. Consider what would happen to you if you left this house against my will. The sentries would detain you, and there would be an inquiry at head-quarters. We are very unkind to traitors when they visit our camps, and we have our own way of dealing with them. Do you remember Major Royate, of the Engineers, whom the Cossacks took at Plavno? They tied him to a tree, I think, and the wolves ate him at

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sundown. Then there was your Lieutenant de Duras, whom they burned on a fire of logs at Letizka ; and another, I think, was hacked to pieces with sabres on the eve of Borodino. All this is very terrible, but in your words, *à la guerre comme à la guerre*. You say that you fight with barbarians, and you will not quarrel with their customs. Are they not poor savages whom you have come here to correct ? Messieurs, I do not know what would happen to you if I gave the alarm from that window at this minute. It would not be the water, for the river is frozen ; but it might very well be the wolves, as your ears will bear witness if you will be good enough to listen."

With this he opened the rude window of the barn, and, far away in the thick of the forest we could hear the dismal howling of the famished brutes. What was the man's intention, or why he talked in this way, I could not imagine ; but presently, as he drank deeper, his reserve became less and his true meaning more apparent. Not for a moment had he been deceived by the tale which madame told him. One of us, he knew, was her lover, and that man he meant to discover and to kill.

"Frenchmen," he said presently, passion growing upon him as he spoke, "I will let two of you leave this house if the third re-

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mains. Cast lots amongst yourselves, if you please ; it is a matter of indifference to me. But one man I will give to my Cossacks, so help me Heaven ! ” And with that he laughed savagely, as though this sudden humour pleased him mightily.

To this it was impossible to make any answer. We held our tongues, while Madame Pauline crossed over to the man's side and began to speak rapidly in Russian. It was plain, however, that she both appealed and commanded in vain. An Eastern passion for revenge suffered no woman's entreaty. He knew that none of us would betray the others, and he believed that he had us all in the net of a devilish vengeance.

“ Two of you shall go,” he kept saying—“ two. I will give you five minutes by the clock. If you do not make a choice then, it is for my Cossacks to deal with you. As you please, messieurs ; that is my last word.”

We had no response to make. The man's anger and the woman's despair were both very dreadful things to hear and see, and we turned aside from them to argue the question in quick whispers. Plain was it that our hope of life hung upon a thread, and, all our fighting instinct returning, we began to say that we must deal with Tcharnhoff ourselves. Should

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we make a dash from the house, or should we seize the man where he stood? The latter seemed the wiser thing. We risked all by doing so, and yet might win all. No sooner was the course determined upon than, snatching his sword from the chair where it lay, Payard made a dash for the Cossack. Alas! that was the last thing he ever did in his life, for a pistol-shot rang out at the very instant, and our friend fell dead across the table. Tcharnhoff had shot him; and the smoke had not lifted when Pauline herself stabbed her lover to the heart, and he rolled headlong on the floor, almost at my feet.

“Go!” she cried, her face white as with the pallor of death. “I will say that you killed him. Go and leave me.”

We waited for no other word. In the distance we heard the report of a musket and the alarm spreading through the camp. We had an instant between us and eternity, and be sure we made the best of it.

VI

It was a glorious night when we reached the open, a full moon shining upon us and the snow glistening as though dusted with diamonds.

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We could see the bivouac fires of the camp still burning brightly and the figures of the awakened Cossacks moving about them. You may imagine how the spectacle quickened our steps, and with what wild hope of life we crossed the frozen ground to the horses which stood for our salvation.

For myself I do not think I have ever run so fast in my life, and never shall run again, as upon that amazing night. Already my heated fancy would have it that I could hear the thunder of hoofs upon the snow and the savage cries of the men whose sabres would cut us down. The stillness all about us, the silent majesty of the frozen woods, the utter solitude of the steppes enhanced this impression and all the gloom of it. What fools we had been to come on such an errand at all! And how dearly we had paid for it already! It now remained to prove that we could become men even in the face of death most revolting.

I say that we ran, but that is hardly the word for it. So difficult was the ground, so slippery, that sometimes we would be on our feet and sometimes sliding like lads at a school. The clamour behind us was now unmistakable, but plainly it converged upon the house we had left, and we doubted not that

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Pauline's wit would give us grace. When we at last came up to the horses, neither of us could speak for sheer exhaustion of the chase, but we clambered headlong into our saddles, and, letting poor Payard's charger go whither it would, we galloped across the open steppes, and entered the first of the woods beyond them. It seemed now that we were safe, yet what men have ever suffered a greater delusion? Hardly had we gone three hundred paces when we came face to face with a party of horsemen, and, reining back in confusion, we discovered them to be Cossacks returning to the camp.

The rencontre was swift and a surprise upon both parties. We, being on the look-out, were naturally the first to draw rein; but the Cossacks, upon their side hardly less watchful, were quickly at the halt and eyeing us wonderingly. Such a droll state of affairs would have amused any man who read an account of it in a book, but it was serious enough to us.

For a brief instant it appeared that we were lost beyond hope, and had nothing to do but to kneel in the snow before these brigands. There were some eighty of them as I could see, and every man now whipped his sword from his scabbard. We were but two against them, and not fifty paces from the place where

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they were halted, and you will judge of our astonishment when they did not fire upon us. This very interval of silence was to be our salvation, for suddenly my nephew wheeled his horse about, and crying to me to follow him, he spurred wildly from the wood. Be sure that I imitated him with all my blood afire and a wild hope of life leaping suddenly to my heart. Their horses had been long afoot, said I, while ours had rested. We might outride them yet, and were madmen if we did not put the matter to an issue.

VII.

So behold us galloping headlong from that fearsome place, the snow flying beneath our horses' hoofs, our heads bent and our swords drawn. For a time I knew not whether we were gaining or losing upon the savage horde which followed us. Wild cries echoed in my ears; the night was black about me; I heard the stertorous breathing of the willing horses, the thunder of their hoofs upon the cruel ground. Then a great silence fell. Léon hailed me, and I could hear his voice distinctly.

"They are done with," he said; and upon that, "What do you make of it?"

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“How?” cried I. “They are not following us!” And then I reined back to listen.

We must have travelled a league by this time, but the face of the bleak country was unchanged. Dense woods and gigantic lakes of snow were the outstanding features, and over all the paralysing silence of a Russian night. Good God! what a solitude, and yet we had won freedom in it!

“They did not think us worth powder and shot,” says Léon presently. “Perhaps they were hungry, or”—and here he pointed grimly over his shoulder—“they may have preferred the camp to that.”

I looked at him curiously.

“Of what are you speaking?” I asked him, and at that he shrugged his shoulders.

“Listen,” he cried, “and then answer for yourself, mon oncle.”

I took a pull upon the rein again, and bent my ear towards the wood. A weird sound, like to nothing but the howling of the doomed, broke the silence all about and made its meaning clear. We had lost the Cossacks, but the wolves were on our track; aye, thousands of them—leaping, barking, snarling from their fastnesses, and bending their heads to the chase like hounds that follow a scent. Good God, what a sight that was to see! With

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what terror the spectacle filled us as we let the maddened horses go and rode again from an enemy more terrible than man !

I had heard of the wolves of Russia, but had seen but few of them during the terrible days of the retreat.

Perchance the fact that we had rarely left our comrades might have had something to do with it, for naturally the fret and stir of an army in retreat would scare such beasts even at such a season ; but here the story was otherwise. They had scented the horses, and nothing now would stop them. Gallop as we would, they gained upon us, and presently were leaping at the throats of the terrified brutes we rode.

In vain we discharged our pistols, struck at them with our swords, and cried for aid to any that might be near us. They came again, with jaws distended and dripping fangs, and we had not gone the third of a league when one caught Léon's horse by the throat and, hanging there, dragged the brute shrieking to the ground.

Surely any man might now have believed that the end had come, and that, whatever else befell, the regiment would see us no more.

There was the horse, being torn to pieces before our eyes ; there was my nephew

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striking at the wolves with his sword while I endeavoured maladroitly to lift him to my saddle. The latter task was soon rendered impossible by the ferocity of the savage beasts who now swarmed about us. They had my own horse down before a man could have counted ten, and, leaping from it as it fell, I ran headlong towards the woods for any shelter that could be found.

Our lives now did not seem worth a scudo. There must have been thousands of wolves about the horses ; a black wood was upon our left hand, a wide, boundless plain before us. Nevertheless, that dim hope which sustains men in all emergencies remained, and, crying to one another to take courage, we entered the wood. There, to our wonder and amazement, we discerned immediately the haven of our salvation. It was a woodlander's hut, not twenty yards from the open, and hardly had we espied it before we were locked and barred within and laughing at the very magnitude of our misfortune.

VIII

It must have been about three o'clock of the morning by this time.

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The hut itself had one window looking over the plain, but was as bare of furniture as any room in a madhouse. Léon's tinder-box revealed a floor of baked earth and a stove which lacked fuel, and this, with a shelf upon which there stood empty jars, was all the ornament this fortress possessed. To us, however, it was more beautiful than any palace, and, taking a drain of brandy from our flasks, we climbed up to the window and looked out over the snows.

11

Our poor horses were but bones by this time, and there were hundreds of the wolves fighting about the carcasses. Less to our liking were the slinking forms about the hut itself and the savage howling which assailed our ears. It was clear that the brutes had scented us out, and would stand sentinel until their courage was screwed up to something more. We could count them by the hundred as they prowled round and round the hut, leaping often at the window, and snarling when the butts of our pistols drove them back. Some, indeed, went so far as to spring upon the roof, and there yapped and howled most dismally; while, as for ourselves, we could but keep guard and wonder what the day would bring. Would it send aid to us, or must we be prisoners there until we perished of hunger and cold?

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This was a question neither dared answer. The minutes became as hours while we waited for the dawn. The horror of the snow paralysed our faculties and almost forbade speech between us.

I cannot tell you truly of all that happened during that appalling vigil. It is odd to look back to it now and to remember the light words with which Léon and I would endeavour to cheer each other ; how we laughed and jested when our nerves were at a tension and it seemed that any minute the cold might overcome us and the door be left open to death in its most revolting aspect. But an instant of carelessness, and there would have been a dozen brutes at our throats, and we should have shared the fate of the wretched horses whose very bones were now vanished from the plain.

All this was in our minds, yet our lips made no mention of it. "Courage," we said ; "the day will help us." It seemed a vain hope, for who should be in this wild place when the sun rose again ? You answer the Cossacks. Aye, true enough, it was the Cossacks who came just as the day had dawned, and the red light of the morning sun shimmered upon that frozen sea.

Léon heard them sooner than I, but the

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brutes were quicker than he. I had taken my turn at the window, and had just crashed my pistol into a gaping mouth which menaced me, when the wolves around suddenly pricked their ears and turned their heads towards the east.

“There are horsemen at the gallop,” said Léon at the same moment; and, listening, I heard the muffled thunder of hoofs upon the snow.

“Would they be our own men?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

“We must be five leagues from the high road. Which of our fellows would come this way?”

I could not answer that, and had no need to, for hardly were the words spoken when a troop of Cossacks appeared at a gallop, and instantly the wolves closed in about them. This was a fine sight, and one I never shall forget. To watch those dashing horsemen hewing and firing and slashing at the pack about them, to wonder why they thus rode desperately, to speculate upon their destination, were all in the mind's task as the picture unfolded. Were we the pursued, or had they other quarry? Certainly they would not have to look far for us, for there in their track upon the snow lay

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our saddles and bridles, at which the famished brutes still gnawed.

Now, it occurred to me that they must certainly discover us, and that our shrift would be short. The beasts themselves, scared by the thunder of the sounds, broke presently and fled to the woods whence they had come. The Cossacks rode up to the very place where our bridles lay, and yet they did not halt. What drove them thence? I will tell you in a word—the Red Hussars of our own Guard were at their heels, hunting them as though they were vermin of the woods, and cutting them down without pity like wheat that falls before a sickle.

Ah! what a sight that was to see. What sounds were those to hear—the shrieks of the poor devils whose skulls were cleaved, the cries of triumph of the victorious pursuers—they were music in our ears. Yet saner men would have asked how this majesty of war would help us. But five minutes had passed when pursued and pursuers were gone as they had come, and we were alone again. The situation had changed but in this—that no wolf now yapped about that wattled hut. We climbed from its window, and went out through the wood without fear. We were alone, and far from salvation. At least, we thought so for

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a full hour, until a second troop of the Red Hussars appeared in the open, and we hailed them joyfully.

Then, indeed, was the end of the story written, and then we knew that we should see our comrades again.

IX

WE returned to the bivouac of the Vélites that night, and there told our story. Many mourned the gallant Payard, but there were others who asked of Madame Pauline. What had happened to her after we had fled from the camp? We could not answer the question then, but I answered it in the following June in Paris, when I met her in the Rue de Rivoli and recognised her instantly. A fine woman, messieurs, and one who is a very good judge of a dinner, believe me.

CHAPTER VI

THE WITCH IN ERMINE

I

I HAVE spoken little of the Emperor during these momentous days; but it is to be remembered that I was chiefly with the rear-guard, and so I hardly saw His Majesty until we came to Slawkowo.

Often have I been asked in Paris how he carried himself during the terrible retreat from Moscow, and how it came to be that he escaped the fate which overtook nearly half a million of men in that fearful flight. I have always answered that the Emperor took his fair share both of the risks and the hardships of the journey, and that, so far from travelling in his famous berline, he was often afoot, walking with and encouraging the soldiers who had served him so well.

It is true that he never suffered the miseries of an open bivouac, and that, wherever we went, some habitation was discovered at night to shelter him and the intimate members of

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his staff. Food, also, he had in abundance, and often shared it with his staff. What he could not escape was the peril of the Cossacks, who swarmed upon our flanks like wasps, and rarely left us an hour in which we could march with confidence.

Some there are who say that Napoleon Bonaparte was entirely without pity for his fellow men. I have seen it recorded that he marched, over the dying and the dead with indifference, and was even heard to say that no man who had seen so many corpses upon a high road could ever believe in the immortality of the soul. This must be a malicious invention of his enemies, and it would not be accepted by any soldiers of the Guard. The Emperor suffered as we suffered during those unforgettable days, and more than one man could tell of the pity bestowed upon him by the general for whom he would so willingly have died.

II

LET me give you an instance of what befell us when we were some leagues from Smolensk and were approaching the village of Liadoui.

The Emperor had ridden out of the town that morning escorted by the grenadiers and

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the chasseurs, Prince Eugène with General Davoust and Ney being left behind in charge of the rearguard.

I myself set out with the Vélites about an hour after His Majesty had left, upon a road whereon familiar scenes were soon to be encountered.

The army had got no food in Smolensk, and its sufferings began again directly we reached the open country. Just as heretofore, men fell out and perished before the eyes of their helpless comrades. Some would stagger for a little while like drunken men, stretching out their arms to us and craving pity; others went mad in their delirium, and I remember well with what horror we saw a dragoon gnawing madly at the neck of a frozen horse, while his lips were red with his own blood. To all this we had now become inured, and, knowing the impossibility of helping the poor wretches who succumbed, we could but shut pity from our hearts and bend our heads to the bitter wind which swept over this God-forsaken land.

It was during this march that I came up with the Emperor, who had been riding with the grenadiers and was now halted in a picturesque group near by the edge of a thicket.

Here we found a poor woman whose baby

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was but two days old, and who mourned the loss of this infant—frozen stark dead—as though she had been at her own home in Paris. She was a *cantinière* of the fusiliers, and her husband, an old soldier who had fought at Jena, did what he could for her; but it was all of no avail, and despite His Majesty's command that I myself should attend her and that she should be given of the best from the Imperial supplies, she expired in the snow before our eyes.

The Emperor was greatly affected by this distressing occurrence, and when he saw that the poor woman was dead he commanded me to accompany him, intimating that there was hardly a surgeon left in his entourage. This compliment pleased me very much, remembering how we had parted, and I rode by His Majesty's side for some leagues, telling him all that I had seen and done since we quitted Moscow. What surprised me particularly was that he made no mention of *Mademoiselle Valerie*, nor of her visit to him at *Slawkowo* and of the episode which had led up to it. It was his wont, however, thus to treat the officers he liked best, and if I had been doubtful of his favour on that occasion, I could take heart when he pinched my ear suddenly as we came to the village of *Liadoui* and said

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with a smile : “ You will remain with me to-night, major ; I have something very much in your line.”

This was a quite unexpected compliment, and brought the blood to my cheeks. I could not readily imagine upon what service His Majesty would employ me, but I spent the day in anxious speculation, and when he summoned me at about nine o'clock that night I was all agog, as you may well imagine.

Why had I been thus chosen, and what was the employment ?

You shall see now how very strange an affair it turned out to be.

III

THE village of Liadoui is built of wood upon an open situation not many leagues from Krasnoë. The Emperor slept at the post-house, a modest edifice which two companies of the fusiliers were to guard. I myself got a bivouac with the priest, who needed more than one blow from the butt end of a musket before he was glad to see me. The whole situation of the little force in Liadoui would have been considered dangerous at any other time, but we had to take the best we could,

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and the fact that there were Russians on both flanks had ceased to trouble us while we could get food and shelter.

For the first time now for many a day I got a dish of beef and rice that night, and a bottle of wine to wash it down. This His Majesty sent me from his own table, and be sure I shared it with my comrades. We were in consequence quite a happy company, and we sang "Veillons au salut de l'Empire" as merrily as we might have done in the barracks at Paris. Then came His Majesty's summons for Major Constant to attend him at once; and quitting my comrades with reluctance, I put on the great fur coat which I had carried from Moscow, and went across to the post-house.

Much to my surprise I found the Emperor alone. He sat in a spacious room overlooking the street, and the remains of his dinner were still upon the table. Clad in the well-known grey overcoat and the little cocked hat, without which none of us would have recognised him, I perceived also that he had a heavy cape of fur about his shoulders and wore fur-topped boots almost to his hips. He seemed mightily pleased to see me, and, pouring out a glass of wine, he bade me drink it.

"Do you remember this place?" he asked me as the first question.

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I told him that the Vélites had not passed that way before, having taken the northern road to Moscow. He, however, hardly waited for my answer, but, watching me drink the wine, he said :

“ I see that you do not know it. That is to the good ; you will not ask me unnecessary questions. Now drink your wine and come and see your patient. She is young—you will not object to that. The Vélites, I understand, are critical ; it is for that reason I chose a surgeon from your ranks.”

He laughed as though pleased at the jest. Buttoning the fur cape closely about him, he left the room immediately, and I followed him, the wine freezing upon my moustache as soon as we were out in the bitter night.

Never have I known a cold so intense nor a wind that shrivelled the flesh so quickly. Yet the scene itself was picturesque enough, and under any other circumstances a man might have stopped to marvel at it. The moon now shone full and clear from a cloudless sky ; the trees about Liadouï glistened with a thousand diamonds of the frost ; the snow beneath our feet was as hard as iron and burnished with a sheen of silver light. Imagine upon this wooden houses with all their windows aglow, dark forms moving here and there, the

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distant rumble of cannon upon the road, and even the echo of musket shots, and you will see the picture as I saw and remember it.

Whither was the Emperor going, and upon what errand? I could not so much as imagine his purpose when we quitted the post-house and, crossing the street, entered upon a narrow footpath which seemed about to lead to the neighbouring forest. The peril of such a journey, with the Cossacks all about us and the night hawks everywhere, would have been patent to a child, and it even amazed an old soldier like myself, who could but marvel at such imprudence.

Was it possible that His Majesty could be about to visit the Russian camp secretly, as so many of our brave fellows had done?

I dared for the moment to believe it, until the shape of a house emerged suddenly from the shadows and I saw that we had come to a considerable habitation upon the very brink of the woods. To my astonishment this was guarded by sentinels, and no sooner were we out of the shadows than one of them challenged us angrily.

“*Salut de l’Empire*,” said His Majesty, advancing with a smile, and, the man having brought his musket to the salute, we passed the gate and entered the house.

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IV

NATURALLY we were expected. It was evident that His Majesty would never have gone upon such a journey if he had not known very well that he would find a welcome at the end of it. The army hears many stories and must listen at all times with prudent ears. We had mentioned the name of more than one *belle fille* since we had left Paris, and we knew that we should mention many another before we returned there. So you will imagine my surprise when it was not a young woman but a very old one who greeted us upon the threshold of this remote house.

I saw she was old, but it would have puzzled a man to have guessed her age. Shrivelled and wan, with a skin of parchment and hair of flax, her eyes nevertheless glittered like those of a hawk, and her hands were ablaze with diamonds of wonderful lustre. Her dress was rich, and such as usually worn by noblewomen in Russia. She wore a silk robe trimmed with ermine, and the most wonderful cape of the same costly fur about her hunched shoulders. To His Majesty she was deferential beyond compare. She welcomed him with a curtsy full of the old-time stateliness, and to me she extended her hand to be kissed. Then

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she bade us enter the *salle à manger* of the house, and I perceived at once that supper was prepared there.

I have told you that it was an extensive dwelling, though built of wood, and certainly this apartment was fine enough for anything. The walls were everywhere hung with old French tapestry; the furniture must have come from our own Paris. There was china of Sèvres upon the table, and that extravagant porcelain in which the East and the West commingle and delight. Two liveried servants stood at the table's head and bowed low as the Emperor entered. He, however, appeared but ill at ease, and I plainly perceived that he was seeking someone whose presence he had expected.

This whetted my curiosity. The old lady herself, setting His Majesty at the head of her table, now sat down upon his right hand, and motioned me to a seat beside her. Then she made a signal to the lackeys, and instantly they began to serve us with all manner of luxuries unlooked for in such a place, and certainly not discovered since we had left Moscow.

The man who has lived upon horseflesh for many days is a good judge of any kind of cooking, and I could not but think, as I sat at the table, of that unhappy mendicant who

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had said to Louis XV., "Sire, how hungry I am!" and had been answered with the quip, "Lucky devil."

To me this was a Gargantuan feast such as had never been surpassed in all my years.

We had the fine sturgeon in which the Russians delight, their own caviare, excellent mutton, and chickens which were matchless, and all washed down with the wines of Burgundy, and upon that with draughts of our own magnificent brandy. When we had finished we were even offered a little preserved fruit and some of the tobacco which the Russians smoke rolled in slips of paper. His Majesty condescended to try one of these, but made little of it, and presently it became apparent to me that he was anxious, and that his anxiety no longer brooked the control of silence.

"Madame," he asked without warning, "where is your daughter Kyra?"

The question had been expected, and madame lifted her wise eyes when she heard it.

"Ah!" she exclaimed in French, "so you are anxious to speak to Kyra again."

"Why not?" says His Majesty. "She told me many things I wished to hear; is that not a reason?"

"And your Majesty found them true?"

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For an instant the Emperor seemed to be dreaming. Then, tapping the table lightly with his fingers, he said :

“ In the main they were true. She told me that Moscow would be burned.”

Madame Zchekofsky—for such I discovered the lady’s name to be—feigned great pity.

“ Ah, what a dreadful thing—and so many of your poor soldiers who suffered ! Little did I think when I heard the child speak that such wisdom was in her keeping, but so it is, as your Majesty admits.”

“ Most willingly. I expected to hear more of it to-night. Is your daughter ill, or is she merely absent ? ”

Madame Zchekofsky shook her head.

“ She is ill, sire ; it is the bitter cold of this terrible winter. Otherwise she would have been by your Majesty’s side to-night.”

“ Ah ! ” cried the Emperor, with a gesture of disappointment ; “ then I must not see her ? ”

“ I fear not. These visions are not to be encouraged, as I am sure Dr. Constant will tell you. Those who command them suffer much afterwards. Is it not so, doctor ? ”

I hardly knew how to answer her. It had come to me suddenly that this old woman was playing with both of us, and there flashed

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upon me the disquieting^o thought that His Majesty's life might even be in danger. Could the Russians have laid hands upon him at such a moment and carried him a prisoner to Petersburg, then indeed were the fortunes of my country imperilled, and a blow struck at the Empire from which it might never recover. Yet what was I to do? The Emperor was as good a judge as I of the situation, and it would have been the mere effrontery of a subordinate which would have reminded him of its dangers.

"Madame," said I, "these things do not concern men of common sense. When I go to bed at night the only vision that I look for is that of the morning sun. If your daughter be a prophetess, I am sorry for you both, for it has never seemed to me a profitable occupation. Discourage her if you can—that is my advice."

She shook her head.

"And yet you heard His Majesty say that she foretold the burning of Moscow?"

"A guess at hazard," said I. "What is more, madame, she may have known that your Emperor was about to burn it. These things are not done by one or two people, but by many thousands. It is quite probable that she should have heard of the intentions."

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His Majesty smiled at this, yet the old hawk regarded me with some malice. What her object was—whether to push the fortunes of her house with the Emperor, or merely to advance his interest in her daughter—I could not then imagine; but I know now that she had intended to follow us to Paris and there to establish herself if she could.

My pessimism evidently angered her; she had looked for me to support His Majesty in this amiable humour.

“Well,” said she, rising abruptly, “it is easy to put the matter to the proof. Kyra should not leave her room, but His Majesty may go there if he will. He shall then tell me if it were a guess or no. Do you desire that, sire?”

I could see that the Emperor was greatly pleased; he rose at once and waited for her to show him the way. In that brief interval I stepped to his side and begged to be permitted to follow him.

“A whim, if you like, sire. Perhaps I am also a prophet,” said I, and we exchanged a glance I shall never forget.

The Emperor knew that he was in peril, then. Did he also know the nature of it? If so, he were wiser than I, who followed him merely upon an impulse for which I could not account.

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V

WE mounted a wide flight of stairs and stood for an instant before a great carved door at the head of them. The house was very silent, and the lackeys had disappeared. I could hear the distant sounds in the village and from the high road the rumble of cannon and the blare of bugles. But these were fitful and easily to be explained. What I did not like was the uncanny silence in the dwelling itself. We entered a great ante-room on the first floor, and from that passed to a little bedroom such as a young girl might have occupied. It was empty, but madame knocked at the door which led from it, and, receiving no immediate answer, we all sat down and waited in the darkness.

“The child sleeps,” said the Emperor.

The old woman muttered something I could not distinguish.

“Of what nature is her illness?” His Majesty asked next.

“It has been a fever,” says madame; “but she is better of that, and now suffers only from weakness.”

“In which case we must wait until she awakes. Do you not suggest a better place than this, madame?”

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Madame rose at this rebuke.

“ I will go in myself,” she said ; but before she could take a step the door of the adjoining room was opened and Mademoiselle Kyra herself appeared.

Her dress was a long white robe tied with a girdle. Her hair was like her mother’s, but more silken in texture, and fell, as the hair of many Russian women does, almost to her feet. I thought her amazingly beautiful—by far the prettiest woman I had yet seen in this damnable country, and, in truth, I envied His Majesty such good fortune. He, however, seemed in no way impressed by the child’s looks, but only by her attitude, which was that of one who walked in her sleep and might not be awakened without danger. Stepping back, with his finger on his lips, the Emperor let the girl go slowly from the room to the great ante-chamber beyond, we following upon tiptoe, as though we spied upon this unlooked-for apparition.

For a moment I thought that Mademoiselle Kyra was about to descend the stairs to the dining room we had left, but she crossed the landing at the stairs head, and, opening a door upon the far side, entered another bedroom, and from that a spacious apartment furnished like a chapel. Here the Emperor followed her,

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but madame forbade me to go. I had an instantaneous vision of a picture of the Madonna and a lamp burning before it. Then I saw the girl stumble and appear about to fall, but His Majesty caught her in his arms, and madame immediately closed the door upon them.

"You can wait," she said, and, closing the door of the bedroom and drawing a heavy curtain over it, she left me standing sentinel in that black, dark room.

VI

It was an odd situation, I must confess.

The army is well acquainted with more than one such expedition in which His Majesty has figured, and I was not the first officer, by many, who had watched a house wherein he pursued an adventure of this kind.

But here the circumstances were very different.

The girl was not as other women of whom we spoke in merriment. She had come from her apartment in sleep, and was sleeping, I believe, when she entered the chapel. The impulse which drove His Majesty appeared to me to be curiosity rather than love. I have heard that he was somewhat given to omens

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and the occult sciences, and while pretending to be an absolute disbeliever in them, would nevertheless lend a willing ear to any charlatan who had a tale to tell. Mademoiselle Kyra had forewarned him of certain happenings upon his march to Moscow, so what could be more natural than that he should desire to hear what she had to say of his retreat?

These thoughts were uppermost in my mind when I found myself alone in the room. I could hear no sound whatever from the chapel, not even that of a woman whispering. The house itself had fallen again to a silence quite remarkable. I tried to look from the window of the bedroom, but found it so frosted that not a thing could be seen beyond. The old lady herself had disappeared and gone I knew not whither. Another, perhaps, would have spied upon the Emperor, and even found a pretext for following him into the chapel. This kind of curiosity has never afflicted me, and all that I remembered was the continued peril of our situation.

How if the Cossacks made a sudden dash upon Liadoui and overpowered the sentinels at the gate!

Nothing could be easier than such an assault. We had but two regiments of the grenadiers in the village, and they were worn

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to death with marching. Indeed, I believed they were already sleeping in any bivouac they could find. The guns were mostly a day's march ahead of us, and we had little artillery in our train. Nothing, I said, could be looked for as surely as a sudden descent of the Cossacks upon any house in which they might imagine the Emperor to be sleeping. So you will understand my sense of responsibility and the keen ear I leant to any sounds from without.

The silence of the night seemed, indeed, almost unnatural. I began to be affrighted by it. What was odd was the length of time His Majesty was closeted in the dark chapel. It is true that I heard the sound of voices when a little while had passed, and that a busy murmur of talk went on at intervals for a full hour. Then for a spell again there was silence, and it was during that interval that I first heard the alarm from without.

There were horsemen approaching the village. My trained ear told me the truth in an instant, and bending it to the glass, I made sure that I was not mistaken. Horsemen, I said, were riding across the frozen snow, either towards Liadoui or to Madame Zchekofsky's dwelling. No sooner was the opinion formed than the cry of a dying man confirmed it.

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Someone had sabred or bayoneted the sentry at the gate. There is no mistaking that awful cry which a man utters when he realises that he has lived his life and that the steel within him has reached his heart. I knew it too well, and, springing back at the sound, I ran to the chapel doors and beat heavily upon them.

“Your Majesty,” I cried, “for God’s sake !”

The door was locked, but someone opened it instantly, and there stood Mademoiselle Kyra and the Emperor by her side. She was wide awake now and a look of terror had come upon her pretty face.

“I beg you to go,” she said to him.

For answer he stepped out into the bedroom and asked me what was the matter.

“The Cossacks are here,” I cried ; “they have killed the sentinel. Your Majesty must not delay.”

Napoleon Bonaparte was no coward, as all the world knows, and he heard me almost with nonchalance.

“Are you quite sure ?” he asked.

I told him that there was no doubt of it.

“Listen for yourself, sire,” said I ; “they are entering the house.”

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He shrugged his shoulders and turned to Mademoiselle Kyra.

“Is there a way out by the chapel?” he asked her.

Her affrighted eyes answered him.

“You will have to return by the great staircase,” said she; and at that he smiled, for we could hear already the tramp of many feet upon it.

“That is a pity,” says he now. “Major Constant must see what they want.”

Then, speaking very earnestly to me, he exclaimed: “I count upon your devotion, major; do what you can.” And instantly he re-entered the chapel, and I drew the curtain across its doors.

There was now, I suppose, an interval of ten good seconds in which I had an opportunity to think. Two alternatives faced me—I might either draw my sword and meet the men as they entered, or feign fraternity and so try to disarm their suspicions. The latter course occurred to me as the wiser, and without a moment's hesitation I sprang upon the bed and drew the heavy counterpane over my shoulders. The thing was hardly done when the door burst open and some ten men entered the room. They were Cossacks of the Guard, and every man had his sword drawn.

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VII

I KNOW little of the Russian tongue, but the few words that I have were sufficient to tell me that the first cry uttered by the leader of the men was for light. This was echoed down the stairs, and presently there came a sergeant with a lantern and another behind him with a wax candle in his hand.

I had not moved during the interval, and I lay still yet a little while. The fellows began to peer about immediately, and of course they soon discovered me upon the bed. Then, truly, I thought that I had not a minute to live. There were the barbarians, savage as it seemed in the lust of blood. There was I as helpless as a bullock at the slaughter. They had but to cut and thrust, and the story of Surgeon-Major Constant would have been written for all time. You may imagine how my heart beat while I waited to feel the prick of the steel and wondered how death in such a shape would come.

To a man so placed delay is but an agony anew. I could have prayed that they would strike swiftly, and when they did not strike I laughed aloud like a woman grown hysterical.

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God in heaven, how I laughed ! Sitting up in the bed and watching that ring of steel, no hyena in the wilderness uttered such sounds as I. The best joke that was ever told could never have moved me as that perilous situation. Not for my life, not even for the life of His Majesty, was I acting thus ; nay, if a man had offered me ten thousand golden pieces to have recovered my serenity, the money would have been lost for ever.

Well, the effect upon the Cossacks was amazing. I have never had a doubt that the first of the band had already raised his sabre to thrust me through when this weird fit overtook me. The wonder of it held his hand and left him powerless. He stood there looking at me as though he had come suddenly upon a madman. Possibly I laughed, as men will at times, with an air which is infectious, compelling others to take up the catch, and certainly depriving them of their anger. Be that as it may, there were fellows laughing in that bedroom before I had done, and anon the whole company roared aloud with me. Such a thing was like a sudden vision of life to a man whom death had held by both hands. In a twinkling I had got my courage back, and what was but an ailment had become a stratagem. If laughter could save the Emperor,

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then was I the man. Soon I began to sing the "Ram, ram, ram, ram, plan, tire-lire ram plan," and shouted it with all my lungs and danced a step before them. They in their turn clapped me on the back with their sabres and cried for drink.

"You will find it in the *salle à manger*," said I, speaking to one of them in French, and then, opening my mouth and making the sign of a man drinking, I caught the fellow by the arm and dragged him down the stairs. The others followed like sheep that would go into a fold. We were all drinking about the table in less than no time, and an hour had not run before the whole troop of them were as drunk as sailors at Toulon.

I say they were drunk, but a man must have been in Russia to know how very drunk they were.

This was no mere rollicking, no shouting of songs or bawling of catches, but right-down deep drinking, and upon that a stupor which bore a very good likeness to death. I watched them tumbling to the floor one by one, and, spurning their bodies aside with my foot, I remembered His Majesty and went back to him. He was still standing at the stairs head where I had left him, and Mademoiselle Kyra was still by his side.

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"Well," says he; and I told him at a breath.

"There's an end of this until daybreak," said I. "Your Majesty can go now."

He did not speak, leaving it to the girl, who went slowly to the window and, opening it a little way, looked out across the field of snow. Then she shut the casement quickly and came back to us.

"They are watching the house," she said quietly. "It is as I thought. They know your Majesty is here, and are waiting for you."

"Then let them find me instead," said I immediately, and, stepping up to the Emperor, I begged the loan of his cloak and cocked hat. "You will find mine a little large, but they will serve, sire," said I. "If I draw off the troop, well and good. If not, your Majesty may yet find a way."

He looked at me in his own way, as one whom danger amused rather than dismayed.

"I will send a regiment of hussars to bring you back," he exclaimed, pinching my ear as he was wont to do when pleased. Then he handed me his cloak and cocked hat and I donned them as though the joke were entirely to my liking. For all that, I knew very well what I was doing, and I would not have valued

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my life at a lira's purchase when I left him at the stairs head and went down.

Mademoiselle stood by his side then, and they were deep in talk. I might have said that I was forgotten already, and that may have been true enough. Men have died for Napoleon Bonaparte, knowing well that their very names would be unremembered when the sun rose again. Others will imitate them, for such is the spirit his gifts of kingship have inspired.

* * * * *

It was the dead of night when I went out, and not a sign of the old hag. I believed then that she had betrayed us, and had I met her that would have been the last hour she had lived. But, as I say, she had clean vanished, and the only lackey visible was dead asleep by the stove in the hall. Very softly now I pushed open the outer doors and looked about me. The spectacle was wonderfully beautiful, but as menacing as it was glorious. A great full moon shone down upon a scene that should have stood in a magic land. Earth and sky alike were aglow with the entrancing lights of winter made magnificent. The cold was intense beyond belief: the frost made a diamond of every pebble the foot crushed. And upon it all was the stillness of God's death.

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. . . the silence of a land which an Eastern winter had shrouded.

Thus for the beauty of the scene. The menace was no less remarkable. There, frosted already, were the corpses of the sentinels the Russians had murdered. To reach the open I must step over the prone figures of brother Frenchmen and look into their staring eyes. The shudder was still upon me when I heard a cry of savage triumph, and knew that the Cossacks were upon me. The troop which Mademoiselle Kyra had seen from the window rode out of the shadows even as I crossed the threshold. They fell upon me as wolves upon a carcass, and no fowl was trussed as surely while a man could have counted twenty.

VIII

IMAGINE the exultation of these men, who believed that they had captured the greatest of Frenchmen, living or dead, and were carrying him to their general.

The first transports passed, their sense of prudence returned to them, and with it a deference which should have won laughter from a log! The Emperor of the French a prisoner in their hands! Heaven above me,

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how they bowed and capered ! What antics they cut ! Never had a man such slaves at his feet. I was set upon a horse immediately, and had a guard at the head and tail of him. The officer saluted until his arm must have been weary. He had caught the Emperor—what a night !

Our way lay over the snows to the Cossack camp upon the far side. Behind me there shone the lights of the house I had quitted, bright stars beyond a frozen sea. I knew that the next hour would find me in the Russian general's tent, and that my shrift must be short. What mattered the regiment of hussars the Emperor was to send ? My body would be frozen on the snows before they could ride out.

Upon this there fell an apathy difficult to understand.

We had suffered so much during those terrible days—hunger and thirst, and blood and wounds—that any man might have opened his arms to death as to a friend. And here was the end of it for me. What mattered it ? In a vision, I beheld the lights of my own France, the home which sheltered all dear to me, the land towards which my eyes had been lifted these many weeks. Never again might I look upon that smiling country. Night and the

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unknown were my portion. There would be few to remember my name to-morrow.

From such thoughts a reality most absurd awoke me.

I have set down this narrative of events as I lived and knew them, and have kept nothing from you, that you may judge of things, not as we look for them, but as an unromantic destiny determines that they shall be.

I say that I awoke with a start, believing myself to be upon a horse and at the very threshold of the Russian camp. Depict my astonishment when, opening my eyes, I beheld again madame's *salle à manger*, the tables spread with meat and drink, the forms of the intoxicated Russians on the floor all about me, and above them the red coats of our own Hussars of the Guard! For an instant I believed that the witch in ermine had cast a spell upon me, and that this was but a vision of her enchantment. Then the merry laughter of my own comrades disillusioned me and I staggered, dizzy and dumbfounded, to my feet.

"Name of a dog," I cried to them, "and what does this mean?"

They answered me with a merriment which became a shout.

"It means that the liquor was very good

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and that you got very drunk," says their captain, clapping me on the shoulder . . . and at him I stared all bewildered.

"Drunk!" I cried. "You say that I was drunk!"

"Undoubtedly. . . . His Majesty told us to take care of you. . . ."

"Then he is not here?" I exclaimed in wonder.

"He is already six leagues on the road to Wilna," was the answer. A child might have put me over at that. I clapped my hands to my fevered brow and began to believe them. Drunk I had been . . . but by drink had I saved the Emperor's life.

And I had done him an injustice in my dream. He has not forgotten, as I knew full well.

IX

You will see how it all happened, and will need no further words from me.

Taking the Cossacks down to madame's *salle à manger* to keep them from the Emperor, I also had been overpowered by their cursed liquor, and had fallen under the table with the rest of them. There I dreamed of Russian

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camps, and France, and death, and all the nonsense of it, and there I awoke to find our own Red Hussars in possession of the dwelling. How they laughed at me! Yet what music their laughter proved to be!

As to old Madame Zchekofsky, I veritably believe that she played a double part that night with all a woman's cunning. Desiring the Emperor's friendship, she encouraged his belief in her daughter's power of prophecy, at the same time trying to keep in with the Russians by informing them of our presence in the house at a moment when she believed we would already have left it. Thus her anxiety and that disquiet I had observed with such misgiving.

I saw her in Paris in the memorable year 1815, and her daughter was with her. Naturally my nephew Léon desired to know so mysterious a personage, and I fancy she found his gifts of prophecy not less considerable than her own. This, however, was long after the terrible weeks when so many thousands of brave Frenchmen left their bones upon the snows of Russia because the Emperor had willed it.

CHAPTER VII

LITTLE PETROVKA

I

THE Emperor was often in personal danger during the retreat from Moscow, but never more so, I think, than after the Battle of Krasnoë.

You must depict us at this time as a rabble rather than an army. There were few regiments save those of the Guard which maintained even a semblance of order. Men fell out at a whim. We had nothing upon either side of us but the frozen steppes and the woods in which the wolves howled. Our own people had burned the villages through which we straggled towards a distant horizon of our salvation. The road itself was black with the bodies of the dying and dead. I shall not dwell upon such pitiful scenes, but recall only those which seem to me of interest to my fellow countrymen.

Often have I been asked how the Emperor carried himself during these days, and that

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is a question which I have made some attempt already to answer.

Chiefly he walked with the grenadiers. There were occasions when he entered his famous travelling carriage, and passed some hours in it; but no one was more ready than he to share the hardships of the journey, and certainly none faced peril with a greater sang-froid. How it came about that His Majesty escaped disaster, I cannot tell you. There were many occasions when a little courage upon the part of the Cossacks would have destroyed the hope of France for ever. So often were we who guarded him but a palsied band of nondescripts, that I wonder to this day at that hesitation which allowed the greatest of our soldiers to slip through Russian hands.

Let me give you an instance to show what I mean.

It was the morning of November 25th. We had passed a forlorn village some miles beyond Krasnoë. The column was headed by a bevy of generals, few of whom were mounted. Behind them there marched a miserable company of officers, all dragging themselves along painfully, and not a few of them having their feet frozen, and wrapped in rugs or bits of sheepskin. The Emperor himself marched in the midst of the cavalry of the Guard. He

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went on foot, and carried a baton. His cloak was large and lined with fur, and upon his head he wore a dark red velvet cap with a trimming of black fox. Prince Murat walked on his right-hand side, and on his left Prince Eugène, while behind him came the Marshals Berthier, Ney, Mortier, and Lefebvre, with others whose regiments had been almost annihilated in the recent battles.

Behind these again were the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Guard. There were seven or eight hundred of them walking in perfect silence, and carrying the eagles of their different regiments. The scene itself was an open plain glistening with frost, and often broken by those dismal clumps of pines with which we were so familiar. A village lay ahead of us, a ravine and a river upon our right hand. We knew that the Cossacks were sheltered by the distant woods, and that any moment might bring them down upon us. And yet we went as stolidly as men who are marching from a field of victory.

Is it to be wondered at that the Russians were perplexed by these tactics, and that even the boldest of them had no heart for a venture which would have destroyed the hope of France in a twinkling?

This is not to tell you that they did not

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attack us. Hardly had we come up to the outskirts of the village when we perceived a battery drawn up by the river and another before the very gates of the hamlet. We had no guns with us at the moment, and we stood there like sheep while the Russians pounded us and their shells decimated our tottering ranks. Lame and helpless and weary, weakened by hunger and the perils of the march, who would have said that so pitiful a force could have withstood the assault even of five thousand brave men? Yet, as I say, they were content to pound us with their artillery, and although we saw great masses of their cavalry about the village, never once did they charge us as we expected them to do.

Presently our own guns came up, and we were able to meet the enemy on better terms. Marshal Ney now put himself at the head of the chasseurs, and boldly charged the Cossacks to the left of the village. His troops suffered severely in this onset, and when he returned to us the frozen plain was dotted with the writhing forms of our countrymen who had been shot down. These poor fellows had suffered so much during recent days that for the most part they died without a struggle. Such as survived were left to the mercy of the Russians, for we were in no position to help

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them, and we had to suffer the mortifying spectacle of seeing the wounded stripped bare and left upon the snows by the fiends who came out of the woods.

I thought surely that His Majesty was lost this day, and when I saw him standing in the very path of the shells, surrounded by no more than forty Fusiliers of the Guard, it seemed indeed to me that the end had come. The Cossacks had but to charge and their booty would have been sure. That they did not do so must be set down to those motives of prudence which animated their General Kutusoff to the end. He knew that the Grand Army was perishing before his eyes, and that the elements would do what the Russians themselves had left undone. When he retired that day we must have lost at least three thousand men, who were left in the hands of his butchers.

But the Emperor was saved by such cowardice, and he slept that night in the village which Kutusoff's guns had failed to hold.

II

THE morning broke clear and sunny, but hardly were we upon the road when the north

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wind began to blow and our sufferings to recommence. The Russians had drawn off for the time being, and we neither saw them nor heard their guns. The troops themselves, no longer fearing an attack, marched in that disorder of which I have spoken. Hardly a regiment could have been distinguished even by one familiar with our army. We were but scattered groups of malcontents, and every man thought only of his own safety.

I had not seen my nephew Léon during the battle, and was very glad to ré-discover him not far from the bivouac. He was marching with other officers of the Vélites when I came up, and I perceived at once that he had made a captive. The latter might, at the first glance, have been taken for a lad of seventeen, clad in stout riding-breeches, and wearing a tunic of rich fur.

The bright eyes of the prisoner and the cheerful manner evidently won upon my comrades, and I was not very much astonished to discover presently that the prisoner was of the other sex, and to hear that she had been caught in the village that very morning, and herself had volunteered to show us the road to the Bérézina.

Such things happened almost every day while we were in Russia, and for a native

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woman to adopt the garb of a soldier was by no means an uncommon thing. The only difference in this case was that the girl herself appeared to be well born, and beyond the station where such monkey tricks would be looked for. It occurred to me at once that she might have been sent out to betray us, and I spoke of it to Léon before he had gone a league.

“Where did you find her?” I asked him.

He parried the question, as a young man would when he has found a companion to his liking.

“She came out of the last house in the village just as we were marching past. I wish I could understand their cursed lingo, mon oncle. I think she comes from a place called Druobona, but am not very sure. In either case, it does not matter,” he added carelessly, “for I do not suppose she will go back there when we have done with her.”

This was said with a laugh which I did not like to hear, and I rebuked him sharply for his levity.

“The girl is well born,” said I, “and this is neither the place nor the time to think of such things. Why do you allow her to go upon such an errand at all? Are there not other guides?”

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He looked at me slyly.

“None so pretty, mon oncle ; and besides, a man can always make a woman understand. She will get us very well to the Bérézina, and there we shall send her back with a present.”

“Of horseflesh,” said I ; and then : “The whole thing is nonsense, and you are likely to pay a high price for her company. Remember what I am saying.”

He promised to do so, but immediately linked his arm in hers and began to sing one of our old marching songs. We must have gone another league before he told me that her home was in a village some few miles to the south of the route the army was taking, but really upon the old main road to the Bérézina.

“You and I will give them the slip at dusk,” said he, “and take our luck again. I will wager the girl’s honesty against a hundred crowns. We can stop the night at her father’s house and get food. Do not look so displeased, mon oncle. We will take twenty of our fellows to see that the Cossacks do not cut our throats, and we shall be half a day’s march on the road to the river before the army has left the next bivouac.”

I did not like the idea of it, but when a

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man is making love to a pretty woman, and she has asked him to her house, there is an end of the argument.

Petrovka, for such the men would call the girl, certainly disarmed suspicion by her frank airs and the merry laughter which lighted up her eyes. She made a handsome boy enough, and it was good to see her dancing across the snow which so many trod with difficulty, and to hear the cheering words of encouragement she bestowed upon all who lagged behind.

The men had come to believe that she was quite a mascot, and soon we must have had a hundred and fifty of the Guard about our party. This was unexpected and not in accord with friend Léon's plan. I believe it had been his secret hope that he and I should go alone to her father's house, but when the sun began to sink upon the horizon, and we left the main road for one which branched towards the south, the whole company followed us immediately. Vain to tell them that our errand was private. The time had passed when officers could have their will in such matters as this; and so it befell that exactly a hundred and fifty men set out to share Petrovka's hospitality, and were determined to enjoy it whatever the difficulties.

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III

WE went marching and singing, and utterly regardless of any perils that might await us upon the road.

For that matter, we saw no Cossacks, and even our old friends the wolves were silent.

The country itself had become less monotonous, and we soon found ourselves in a deep ravine, whose rugged cliffs were capped by the frozen pines.

Here there was a wonderful suggestion of remoteness and solitude; but it occurred to me, nevertheless, that it might be the very spot for an ambush, and I insisted upon a halt until our vedettes had made their reports. We even sent a man up to the heights above to be quite sure that the Cossacks were not camped in the thickets. When these had reported that no living thing moved in all that drear place, we followed Petrovka again and began to think of supper.

She had told us that it was just three leagues from the high road to her father's house, but we must have marched at least five before we came, without warning, upon a miserable village, the outstanding feature of which was the low and straggling farmhouse

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with a mighty barn at the southern end of it. Of a seigneur's habitation there was no sign whatever, and I found it difficult to believe that Petrovka's father could inhabit such a shabby dwelling as that to which she now led us. When we asked her if it were indeed her home, she, to our great astonishment, answered us in French, and replied that it was not.

"My father lives many, many leagues from here," she said, and laughed at the words. "This is the house of the moujik Serges. He was one of my father's servants, and he will feed you, my lords." And this she said with so pretty a grace that our anger was mollified in a moment.

"Why did you pretend not to speak French?" I asked her next.

She shook her head and said that she did not know.

"You make me laugh so much when you talk Russian," she said. I believe that to have been true.

Nevertheless, I was not easy. We had come upon a false errand, and it remained to be seen what was the end of it.

"Let every man look to his powder," said I to Léon, as we entered the precincts of the farm. "The devil and a woman are never

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far apart; mind that we have not caught the pair of them."

He retorted that it did not very much matter either way. Whatever befell us at the farm could be no worse than the peril of the high road and of such a bitter night as this.

Not only was it black and dark by this time, but the north wind blew intolerably, and our very bones seemed shrunken.

You will imagine, therefore, that the bay-ing of the hounds about the farm was as music to us; and you can depict us beating heavily upon the farmer's door, while Petrovka cried aloud in Russian that we were friends.

This settled the matter, and an old and grizzled peasant appeared immediately, and stood bowing on the threshold. I disliked the look of him from the first, and shall always remember the hawk-like eyes which he turned upon our company. Yet what had we to fear from the handful of serfs who now gathered about him—we, a hundred and fifty men of the Guard, with our muskets in our hands?

And was there not Petrovka, with her laughing eyes—Petrovka, who told the old man that he would be paid for all that we had—Petrovka, who petted him and pulled his long beard as though she loved every hair of

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it. She stood as our hostage, and she knew it—the pretty little girl.

Well, we soon discovered that the kitchen of the farm would accommodate no more than the officers of the company, and it behoved the others to seek the shelter of the barn. This they did with a very good grace, for it was a substantial edifice, with a monstrous fireplace at one end and a well-stacked granary at the other. Soon there were flames roaring up the ancient chimney, a babel of talk, and the going to and fro of men who saw themselves supping handsomely for the first time for many a day. We, meanwhile, were ensconced in the farmer's kitchen, with nearly the half of an ox roasting in his gigantic oven and an aroma of well-warmed wine which did one good to smell.

The evening promised to be the most comfortable we had enjoyed since we left Moscow—so little did we foresee what lay beyond our present content.

IV

THERE were a good many bedrooms in the farmer's house, and some of these were very properly given up to the officers.

I shared a room with Léon, whose window

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immediately overlooked the barn wherein our men were still enjoying the unexpected carousal.

Mademoiselle Petrovka, in her turn, said that she would sleep with the girls of the house, and the last I saw of her before retiring was at the moment when Master Léon blew out the candle for the purpose of wishing her good-night. Escaping from his embrace, she climbed the narrow staircase and shut the door at the head of it upon us, while we, amazed to discover beds, made haste to enjoy so unexpected a luxury.

Never before in my life, I swear, did I know the meaning of good blankets as I learned it that bitter night, when the north wind swept the dismal plain and the pines were swaying in a dirge of death. For that matter, I do not think that my nephew and myself could wholly appreciate the reality of our good fortune, and I lay for some time beneath the heavy *Steppdecke* wondering if we had not dreamt the whole of it. Such warmth and comfort were not to be imagined, and we found it almost impossible to believe that thousands of our comrades were then shivering and suffering upon the great high road, and many of them, I doubt not, falling to the terrible sleep from which no day should wake them.

We, on the contrary, might have been the

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children of this hospitable house. Well fed and warmed by wine, we fell into so profound a sleep anon that nothing but the terrible tragedy which ensued could have wakened us. Alas ! that it was so very terrible ! I hardly know how to tell you of it.

Some say that it was nearly four in the morning when the first alarm arose. I cannot be sure about so trivial a circumstance, nor is it of any interest. In my sleep it seemed to me that men were shouting about the house, while a great flame of crimson light burned my eyes and forbade me to open them. A man has the same sensation when he tries to look at the sun at noon, and it may be answered that he is a fool to do anything of the kind. So, in my own case, I did not open my eyes for a long time, and not until Léon's strong hand dragged me from the bed did I understand what was happening.

"Wake up, mon oncle !" says he in a sharper voice than ordinary. "Don't you see that the place is afire ?"

It was a word to arouse any man, and I staggered up when I heard it, rubbing my eyes and trying to understand him.

"How ?" cried I. "The farm afire ? Why, then, did you not wake me before ?"

"I have been trying to do so for the last

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five minutes, but you sleep like a Gascon, mon oncle. Get your clothes on and follow me. There will not be a man of them alive if we don't make haste."

With this he ran down the stairs, and left me groping in the fitful light for my tunic and the heavy sable coat which I had brought out of Russia.

It was clear by this time that the fire had begun in the barn which harboured so many of our men, and that it had not yet reached the buildings we occupied. For all that, it promised to be a terrible conflagration, and my ears were assailed already by the woeful screams of the wretched company, themselves waking to the peril. What kept the poor fellows in the barn, I knew no more than the dead. I could see two great doors opening upon the yard, and they were wide enough to let a wagon go through. Yet no one unbarred them, and all the time flames and smoke were pouring from the thatch above, and the shrieks of the imprisoned growing louder. This perplexed me beyond words, and it was not until I had shaken the heavy sleep from my eyes that the thought of treachery occurred to me, and I began to understand much that had happened.

The monster of a farmer who had lured us

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here—he had done it, I said, and God knows, if I had had my hand about his throat at the moment, I would have strangled the life out of him.

Well, I bounded down the stairs at the thought, and found myself immediately amid my brother officers, who were striving like madmen to set their compatriots free. Unable to hear a word that was spoken, I nevertheless understood by their gestures that the main gates of the barn had been bolted and barred, and that, until they could be unlocked, the only chance for our fellows was the narrow window at the southern end. For this I now made, Léon at my side, and others as ready to risk their lives in the face of such a disaster.

Let me tell you that the roar of the conflagration was like that of a sea beating angrily upon a barren shore. Commingled with it were the sounds of rending woodwork and the screams of men already burning in the flames; while all was made worse by the intolerable north wind which swept about the building and howled dismally beneath the frozen eaves.

This paralysed the faculties, so that even the bravest found his limbs benumbed and his brain bewildered. No company of raw recruits could have worked to less purpose—some cry-

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ing for hatchets, some vainly for water, yet all incapable of rendering any useful aid, and all equally terrified by the spectacle they beheld. Alas ! to see those pitiful faces at the window of the barn above ; to watch the flames creeping about them ; to behold them fall one by one into the deadly furnace behind them ; and to know that they were Frenchmen and brethren ! Such was the price of the brief respite we had enjoyed ; such was the hospitality that the woman Petrovka had shown us.

Someone got a ladder about this time, and others found axes in the wood-house of the farm. I was among the latter, and I remember with what fury our little party attacked the great front gates and tried to force an entrance. Could we but burst the bolt, our comrades were free in a twinkling ; and you may imagine how we went at it—the blows which we struck, and the curses we uttered.

Minute by minute now the flames were creeping toward this end of the barn. We had no need of lanterns ; the snow was blood-red, and the very wood stood out as though the sun were setting and the night not yet begun. Had we any longer a doubt that treachery had fired the barn, the disappearance of the Russians themselves would have

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clenched the argument. Not a peasant did we see, not a man or woman of those who had served us last night and welcomed us with such smiling faces. The whole farm had become a desert, and, be sure, that of them all Petrovka had been the first to go.

Such was my opinion for a long time, and it endured until, to my great astonishment, I perceived her at Léon's side, and saw that he was in close talk with her. Good God! that a man could have argued with such a woman when his comrades were perishing—that he did not strike her down where she stood! Any other but Léon would have done so; yet, when was the day that a woman's eyes could not win him?

All this went through my head in a flash as I hewed at the giant doors and called upon my comrades to redouble their efforts. The shrieks within the building were now most dreadful to hear. None but a man of iron could have remained deaf to the piercing cries which marked the approach of the fire and told us that our task must be impotent. None the less, we worked with a vigour unimaginable, while the heat became choking, and showers of glowing sparks rained down upon us. The very snow was melted far away from the barn by this time; the sky had turned

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blood red; the branches of the trees were burning. The great door alone stood between our comrades and salvation.

In the end we beat this in, and an aperture was made. Through that we dragged some thirty men and carried them quickly to the farm. Poor fellows, they were terribly burned, and their flesh fell from their bones as we lifted them. What lay beyond in that holocaust I did not dare to inquire. The barn was now but a roaring furnace; the cries had ceased; the moaning of the fire and the night wind alone remained.

V

I HAVE told you that we laid our stricken comrades in the farmhouse and there did what we could for them. So great was their need that the immediate necessity of relieving it put everything else into the shade, and it was not until we had dressed their wounds and done our best to make them comfortable that I so much as remembered the woman Petrovka. Perhaps I should not have thought of her even then but for the fact that a sudden clamour discovered her in the room, and, turning about, I witnessed a violent altercation between her and one of the sick, who raised himself up

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from the mattress where they had laid him, and cried out that she had fired the barn.

“The she-devil!” he yelled in his frenzy. “I saw her do it, comrades; I swear she was the woman!”

Such an accusation naturally arrested the attention of everyone in the room. Léon himself had gone out again with others to prevent the fire from spreading to the neighbouring buildings, and there was no one there but myself who knew anything of Petrovka. The effect of the accusation upon the sick and the hale was almost magical. They did not ask for the man’s proof, nor seek to question him, but, seizing the girl by the arm, they would have struck her down there and then had I not intervened.

“Come, come,” said I; “we must do nothing in haste,” for though I had been willing enough an hour ago to have acted upon an impulse, the heat of passion had passed and a sense of justice prevailed.

If this girl had indeed fired the barn, I would not lift a hand to save her; but we had only the chasseur’s word for it, and he was already far gone in delirium. So it seemed to me that we owed her at least the formality of a trial, and, rushing in before those who held her, I commanded them to hear me.

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"Gentlemen," said I, "this woman is a Russian and well born. It is difficult to believe that she would have done so foul a thing. If she be guilty she must pay the penalty, but let us hear her first. You will all admit the justice of that. Let her be tried and put to the proof, but do not do anything of which you may repent to-morrow."

They heard me with impatience. The child herself clung to me, frantic with terror, her eyes imploring me and her body trembling with fear. Her words were almost incoherent, but nevertheless they denied the truth of the charge vehemently and implored me for God's sake to save her. So much I do not believe I could have done but for Léon, who entered the room at the moment, and, perceiving the situation, leaped towards her, drawing his sword as he did so.

"By the God in heaven," cried he, "I will cut down any man who lays a finger on her." And it needed but a glance at him to see that he meant every word of it.

Such determination was not without its effect. There were both officers and troopers in the room, but I was the senior in command, and I never lost sight of the fact for a moment.

"Gentlemen," said I, "name three of you to act with me as judges in this matter, and

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I promise you satisfaction. If the woman be guilty she shall be hanged. Come now—is not this a proper course to take? Some of you will have daughters of your own. Do not forget them at such a moment as this.”

They assented to the proposition, though I could see that they were far from being appeased. There was a hurried consultation among them, and then the intimation that they had chosen Captains Legard and Fournier, of the fusiliers, and Major Duhesne, of the *chasseurs à cheval*, to act with my nephew and myself. The major stood as spokesman for the others, and first addressed the company.

“It must be here in this room, gentlemen,” he said; “the witness cannot be moved; we will try the woman here.” And that was a claim none could contest.

I shall never forget the scene which now ensued, nor the grim drama we played in that mean farmhouse during the next ten minutes. All about us were the tumbled mattresses and the stricken forms of the men who had been scorched by the flames. Common rushlights and miserable lanterns afforded the only illumination that we had. The trial was held about the stove, whereby there lay the sick man who had denounced Petrovka. She her-

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self was set in a circle amid her judges, while the man was commanded by me to repeat the accusation he had made. He did so with a restraint which astonished me when I remembered his sufferings. Raising himself up in bed, he turned his haggard eyes upon the woman and told us what he knew.

“I was asleep in the little loft of the barn,” he said; “then I heard a sound of someone moving in the straw about me. Thinking it was one of our men, I asked him what he did there; but there was no answer, and for a little while nobody stirred. Presently I heard a crackling sound and smelt fire, and at that I looked up and saw the thatch was ablaze. Then there came light in the place, and I saw the woman. She was creeping down the ladder, but I recognised her all the same. She stands there, messieurs, and she knows that it is true.”

A deep cry of anger escaped the auditors when the man had done. Obviously he did not lie, and his evidence staggered even me. Petrovka herself heard him with a wonder no art could have aped, and her very attitude was an appeal to reason where I was concerned.

Upon my comrades its effect was far otherwise. There were shouts of “à mort!” from every quarter of the room. Some said, “Let

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her speak ! ” others were for not hearing her at all. My loud word of command alone saved her from the imminence of death.

“ Gentlemen,” said I, “ this story is all very well, but it is possible that this man may be mistaken. What confirmation have you of the story ? Let the girl speak for herself ; I see she is ready.”

I turned to Petrovka, and was astonished at her new demeanour. She appeared to have recovered her composure altogether. Her face was pale but wonderfully beautiful. She had removed her cap, and her almost golden hair fell upon her shoulders in a disorder pretty to see. Looking from one to the other of us, she declared her innocence.

“ Frenchmen,” she said, “ I was never in the loft of the barn at all. My father is a Russian noble—do we stoop to such crimes as this ? I am a woman, and I have a woman’s heart ; why do you accuse me of such wickedness ? ”

It was a proud defiance, but it availed her nothing. No one believed her, and all in the room, save Léon and myself, desired her death. In vain I put it to them that some other woman from the farm might have done the deed. They would hear nothing, and presently they began to cry “ Vote—vote ! ” and instantly

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the others held up their hands and proclaimed her guilty.

Now this was a terrible moment for me, and not the less terrible to my nephew. Hurriedly we drew apart and began to ask each other what could be done. It was plain that we had the whole company against us, and at the best we could but hope to temporise. The one thing to do was to save the child from a vengeance which certainly would not be tempered by mercy, and in the hope of this I now addressed myself to the other judges.

“The girl is well born, as you can see,” said I; “it is idle to suppose she has done such a thing. Beware that you do not pay heavily for your haste. We shall overtake the army in the morning, and the matter can be referred to head-quarters. You would be much wiser to let it go there. Do you desire the girl’s death? I cannot believe it, gentlemen.”

It was all unavailing.

“We have judged her,” said the major, “and she is plainly guilty. My determination is to hang her without ceremony, and that,” he said, turning to his companions, “is the vote of the majority.”

Now Léon had listened to this moment without protest, but these words were too

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much for him. Catching Petrovka suddenly by the arm, he drew her close to him, and whipped his sword from his scabbard as one who would brook no denial.

“By God,” said he, “you shall do nothing of the kind !”

It was a brave deed, and would to God it could have saved her. Unhappily such heroism as this is well enough in a story, but of little avail when the realities of life are at stake. There were twenty men atop of my nephew before another word could be uttered, and dragging Petrovka from his arms, they carried her triumphantly from the room.

She did not utter a single cry. I thought there was a smile upon her face, but it was the look of a woman who knows how to suffer.

VI

DAWN was just breaking in a sullen sky at this time. The wind had fallen somewhat, and it was snowing heavily. I remember the scene very well—and, in truth, who could forget it? There to the right were the ruins of the barn; behind us the low buildings of the farm; before us the orchard of the house and the white snow-fields beyond it.

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Without a word said, and acting upon a common impulse, the assassins—for such I must now call them—led Petrovka towards a beech tree by the roadside, and clamoured loudly for a rope. Such a lust for a woman's death is rare among soldiers, and it needed the tragedy of the night to have provoked it.

What could we do? There was still the opportunity of parley, and we did not neglect it. They had not found a rope readily, and while they were still seeking it I addressed myself to Major Duhesne, and again implored him to remember what he was doing.

“The Emperor,” said I, “will never forgive you if this woman is proved to be innocent.”

I might as well have addressed myself to the wall of the house. His rejoinder was such as I might have expected. The woman had fired the barn, he said; there was evidence of that fact. This was just the kind of deed His Majesty punished without mercy. Why should his officers be less zealous?

All of which was said with the air of a man absolutely set upon a purpose, and acting under a strong sense of duty. The others were not less determined, and, unhappily, they had now found a rope, and carried it triumphantly to the beech tree I have named. The scene at

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this moment was very terrible to look upon : the figure of the girl pathetic beyond imagination, and the savagery of her enemies indescribable. It was revolting to hear the shouts of anger when the executioners attempted to throw the cord across a branch of the tree and failed to do so. I could not have believed that Frenchmen would have acted so.

Now, for the second time, was this brutal murder delayed while a ladder must be sent for. In this I perceived the hand of God, and my heart beat fast while the moments of respite were numbered. Would we yet save her ? Might we dare to hope ? A shout from the woods near by answered me. As God is my witness, the Cossacks were upon us. They rode from the thicket like a whirlwind ; their scimitars whistled through the air with a sound of rushing winds.

What a turn-about that was ! No cries of savage exultation now ; no talk of justice and penalty—nothing but a mad race for the shelter of the farm and all the hurly-burly of a wild pursuit. There before my very eyes I saw Frenchmen cleaved to the brisket ; saw the heads of comrades roll upon the snow, and heard the screams of those whom the glittering steel cut down. The thunder of

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hoofs upon the hard snow rang out like weird music of an Eastern dawn. The breath of horses and men froze on the still air. The ground was black already with the figures of the dead.

And what of ourselves meanwhile ? Incredible, a man would say, that we could stand there, my nephew and I, and escape the swords of these terrible Asiatics. Yet such was the case.

Our very desire to save Petrovka had been the instrument of this miracle. No sooner had the others run for the farm than we were at her side, bidding her be of good cheer and seeking still to protect her. Of such protection, however, she had now no need. The men who came from the woods were her friends ; they knew her. The words which passed between the captain and herself were those which commanded our safety. A proud little lady she was in that moment, God knows ! The laughter had come back to her eyes.

“ I never believed that they would kill me,” she said to Léon.

Who would have wished to destroy such a fine illusion ? Not I, for a truth, when every Frenchman in the farm was now dead or a prisoner of the Tartars, who caroused where yesterday we had made merry.

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VII

WE did not return to the farm, nor have any further word with the Russians. Petrovka had recovered all her wits by this time, and she made it plain to us that such a course might be dangerous.

“I will do what I can for your friends,” she said, “and afterwards I shall return to my father’s house. You, meanwhile, go at once to Wilna, and say nothing of what you have seen. That must be a point of honour between us, messieurs. I give you your lives, and you pay me by your silence. God speed; and do not forget little Petrovka.”

We swore that we would never do so. She led us to the stables thereafter, and so we found our horses. A word to the Cossack at the gate made everything easy for us; and be sure that Petrovka took good care to see that food and wine for the journey were found for us. It must have been ten of the day when we quitted the farm at last and waved a long farewell to the mistress of this singular adventure.

“A wonderful little woman,” said Léon, as we turned our heads at length. “To think that she knew all the time who burned us out!”

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“ She did know ! ” I cried, looking at him with astonishment.

“ Certainly ; she has just told me. It was Anna, the farmer’s daughter. Petrovka meant to save her. Can you beat that for loyalty ? ”

I could make no reply. Woman’s courage is always very wonderful. What man will pretend to understand it ?

CHAPTER VIII

THE AFFAIR AT THE POST-HOUSE

I

THERE was very little order kept among us after the Battle of Krasnoë, and you may depict us as a scattered host going covertly in fear of the Cossacks.

Men made little attempt to keep up with their regiments. The Chasseurs and Fusiliers of the Guard, with whom the Emperor marched, were, perhaps, the exception; but the rest of us went as we could, thinking more of food and shelter than of our own safety, and hardened to any feelings of pity.

The latter is a bold admission to make, but few of those who marched from Moscow will contest it. When comrades are perishing about you every day, when your milestones are the bodies of the frozen dead, the ultimate terror becomes the lesser thing and all the more brutal instincts are awakened. We could not help those who fell; we pushed on, deaf to their appeals. Let any man lag for an hour

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in this bitter cold, and he would sleep as they slept—so many thousands upon the great white highway.

Sometimes it befell that we did not see our regiment for many days together. This, I remember, happened to my nephew Léon and myself as we drew near the Bérézina.

The army heard many disquieting stories at this time, and most of them had to do with the passage of the famous river.

The timorous agreed that the Russians could not lose so favourable an opportunity of falling upon our disorganised units, and that he would be a lucky man who made the passage of the stream in safety.

Others comforted us with the assurance that our engineers would not fail us in this emergency, and were all ready at the Bérézina to strengthen and to guard the ancient bridge. The tales were contradictory, and we knew not which to believe. The river had become our Rubicon, and we imagined that if we recrossed it the victory was won.

This was the condition of affairs on the morning of November 25th, when Léon and I rode a little way with a detachment of some thirty *pontonnières* who were on their way to the Bérézina.

I remember well that the captain of the

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little company warned us to look well after our horses ; “ for,” said he, “ the Emperor has given instructions that all the best are to be taken for the use of the artillery and the wounded.” The Imperial Guard was then some five miles ahead of us, and we had no intention of overtaking it. To that end we soon parted company with the *pontonnières*, and stopped for an hour about midday in what had been a farmhouse upon the high road. There we cooked a little of the rice we carried in our saddlebags, and drank of the brandy which I had carried out of Smolensk.

The repast gave us courage, and we rode on in better spirit afterwards. Alas, that such a mood turned too swiftly to one of despair, when we found that we had lost the road and that the bodies of dead and dying Frenchmen indicated no longer the route to the Bérézina.

II

WE made this discovery about three o'clock of the afternoon.

The day was already done, and a great red sun sank into a billow of mist.

We saw nothing about us but vast fields of snow, gone crimson in the vanishing light,

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and woods which would tell no story but that of wolves.

A profound silence reigned in this frozen wilderness. We did not hear so much as the chime of a distant church bell, nor perceive a single human being upon all that waste. Yet it did not appear to us by the compass that we could be very far from the road to Bobr, through which the Emperor must pass; nor had we any misgivings that we should ultimately come to the banks of the Bérézina if we held upon our course.

"There are no Cossacks here," says Léon, "and there is not much advantage got by company. We have a little food and brandy, and may as well keep it to ourselves. Come on, mon oncle. Let us try to believe that the spires of Notre Dame are to be seen from yonder road, and all the rest will be easy."

He had grown very thin these later days, my poor Léon, and was but a spectre of his former self. I thought of the dashing officer who had cut so brave a figure in Moscow, and heaved a sigh at all that had befallen us since. The word "woman" came no longer to his lips, as formerly, and I believe he would have bartered the whole sex for a loaf of bread and a bottle of good French wine. Who would have had the heart to remind him how many

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thousand leagues we were from that Paris for which he longed so ardently ?

“Imagine what you please,” said I, “but throw in a comfortable farmhouse and a stove to sleep by, and I am your man. It is going to snow again, nephew, and a man may as well be in the Arctic wastes as upon this barren plain. We were wrong to leave the others ; there is safety in numbers, and God knows what is about to befall us. Ah, my dear nephew, what would I not give for such a bed and such a supper as we had at the farm at Druobona ! ”

He sighed at the memory both of little Petrovka and of that night of adventure.

We had now approached the woods, and presently we found ourselves in the depths of a forest which must have been rarely trodden by man. The snow had drifted into vast heaps here, and encircled the trees in great mounds which would have engulfed a wagon. The stillness of it all was that of winter at her zenith. The wind had fallen, and in the distance we heard the howling of wolves. All this prepared us but little for the surprise which overtook us presently, when three mounted Cossacks suddenly appeared in our path and threatened us in guttural tones of which we did not understand a single word.

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Of course, we had drawn rein directly the Russians appeared, and for my part I was quite prepared to surrender to them. These roving bands rarely numbered less than a squadron, and it was idle to believe that two armed men could oppose a hundred. The alternatives were death on the spot, or that intolerable suffering in a Russian prison of which we had heard such evil reports. I whispered as much to Léon, but got nothing from him but a guffaw in return.

“Va-t'en !” said he. “There are only three of them, mon oncle. Do you not see how they hesitate ?”

I perceived it to be true, and drew a pistol from my holster. The Russians carried lances, but were in no hurry to descend upon us. Either they looked for assistance in the vicinity or deemed their advantage in numbers insufficient. What they would have done if we had remained where we were I do not pretend to tell you ; but before I could say another word Master Léon clapped spurs to his horse, and, riding up to the leader, he blew out his brains before a man could have counted two.

“A moi, mon oncle !” he cried ; and be sure I was at his side immediately. Unhappily, my own pistol was badly aimed, and did no more damage than to blow the feather

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from the busby of the ruffian who now confronted me. In an instant he had thrust at me with his lance, and I felt the cold steel cut the sinews of my arm.

Now I wheeled my horse about, and, despite the wound, I drew my sword and aimed at the fellow. He answered me by a loud cry which brought three of his fellows from the wood, and so set five of them against our two. These odds were unexpected, and seemed to say that our onset had been very foolish. Still, there we were, and we must make the best of such folly as we had shown. I could do no better with my fellow than to slash his arm off at a single stroke; but Léon cut the second of the three clean out of the saddle, and found himself attacked by the others who had come from the wood.

I could imagine that, from a spectator's point of view, this fight would have been as pretty a thing as he could wish to see.

There were we two riding up and down the glade with three burly Cossacks at our heels, and devil of a wall against which we might set our backs.

To make matters worse, my own horse stumbled heavily over the solid roots of a magnificent beech tree, and anon I found myself on the ground, with a couple of Russians

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atop of me. They would have done for me but for an ally as unexpected as his appearance was grotesque. This man had been lying, seemingly dead, at the foot of the tree by which I fell. He was one of our *chasseurs à pied*, and he seemed swathed from head to foot in fur. What had wakened him, whether a kick from a horse or the delirium of sickness, I cannot tell you, but, staggering to his feet, he ran at the Russians with his bayonet, and had pinned one to the snow almost before I was aware of his presence. The other waited for no such attention, but, setting his horse at a gallop, rode madly from the wood.

We had now accounted for five of the Russians—no mean achievement for men in such a condition. The poor fellow who had assisted us we discovered to be in a woeful state—his feet frost-bitten and two of the fingers of his left hand missing. He hardly seemed to know what he had done for us, but, sinking at the foot of the tree, he raved incoherently of his home at Châlons, and of his wife and children awaiting him there. We gave him some of the brandy, and tried to lift him upon my nephew's horse, but it was of no good, and presently he appeared to regain his senses and to be aware both of his situation and of our own.

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“ You cannot help me, my friends,” said he. “ The road is yonder ; take it while you may. I am done for.”

And upon this he threw back his head and seemed to die instantly.

This was a very sad thing to see, and sent us from the place in a worse spirit than I had hoped. My own wound had now begun to trouble me, and I discovered that the lance had penetrated the flesh below the shoulder, and left a gaping wound which in another climate might have proved troublesome. As it was, we bound it up stoutly with a piece torn from my tattered shirt, and, the darkness already gathering, and the snow beginning to fall, we prepared to leave the wood in the direction which the poor *chasseur* had indicated to us.

III

I SAY that we prepared to leave the wood, but before we did so the idea came to me to take with us the capes and the busbies of the Cossacks we had slain, in the hope that they would be of service to us in so dangerous a place. Bidding my nephew imitate me, I stripped the fellow I had killed, and invited Léon to do the same to the other.

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"The woods are full of these fellows," said I, "and who knows what this device may do for us? *A la guerre comme à la guerre*. Let us try our luck under the new colours, for it has been bad enough under the old."

He laughed in reply, for my new appearance amused him.

"Upon my word, you would make an excellent Tartar, *mon oncle*," says he; and whether that were meant to be a compliment or a reproach upon my shaggy appearance, I did not attempt to discover. The night had come down, and the moments were precious. It was no time for a trifler's argument, and I pushed on in silence.

The forest became more open as we proceeded, and I now perceived that the avenue must be a high road, so orderly were the groves of beeches which bordered it.

From time to time we heard the howling of wolves, and more than one watch-fire denoted the presence of the Russians. The prudence of the step we had taken in assuming the garb of the Cossacks was now justified by the event. We came face to face with a dozen of these barbarians not a mile from the scene of the strife, and they passed us without drawing rein, evidently being set upon a purpose of their own. Léon was much amused by this,

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and swore that he would swim the Bérézina in the same clothes.

“Chasseurs are out of fashion,” said he, “and hussars have become very cheap. I will go to the Tuileries as a Cossack, mon oncle, and Paris will applaud me.”

I reminded him that Paris was yet a long way off, and that the dreaded river still lay between us and freedom. Like so many of my fellows who deluded themselves with that belief, I thought that we had but to cross the Bérézina to leave our troubles behind us; nor could I foresee in any way what we must suffer before we reached the bridge at Kovno.

This, however, is to anticipate. Behold us for the moment pressing on through the darkness of the forest, often losing the road because of the blackness of the night, and always alert in the presence of our enemies. That there were Cossacks all about us we knew full well, and when we emerged from the woods at last we perceived a whole regiment of them riding southward at a gallop.

This seemed to say that our own army lay in that direction. Undeterred by the presence of the Cossacks, we kept upon our course, and presently we heard the barking of watch-dogs, and espied the lights of a village. A little farther on yet, and the rising moon

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showed us familiar scenes. There were dead and dying here, the bones of horses and the debris of an army that had passed. I perceived immediately that we had regained the high road, and, pressing on to the village, we came up to a considerable post-house, whose cheerful lights shone out warmly upon the snow, while the windows revealed the uniforms of Frenchmen.

Now, this was a pleasant happening, and it is droll to recall what followed upon it. We had thought to grasp our comrades by the hand, and to change with them the news of yesterday and to-day; but hardly had we knocked at the door of the post-house when as great a panic overtook the men within as any I had witnessed since we quitted Moscow. With a loud cry of "The Cossacks!" our fellow-countrymen bolted headlong by a door at the rear of the building, and when we entered there remained but two or three frightened figures huddled about the stove at the far end of the spacious room.

"Name of a dog," says Léon, "I shall play at the Comédie Française yet."

And there he stood, shaking himself like a bear and laughing still at my appearance and his own.

This was all very well, but, fearing that

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the affair might have graver consequences, I went to the door and began to halloo after our comrades. It was all in vain ; they were already at the far end of the village, and I doubt not that they thought it but a ruse to entrap them.

Meanwhile, the few Russians within the room had come up to Léon and were staring at him curiously. Very sternly he commanded them to return to their places, and, bolting the doors, he pointed to the table, upon which a great cauldron of soup was steaming.

“The spoils to the victors,” says he ; and, indeed, that was no time for ceremony. I was just about to tell him as much, when a voice from the far end of the apartment arrested our attention, and, turning about, we saw the very last person in all Russia we would have looked for that night.

“Mademoiselle Valerie, by all that is holy !” cries Léon ; and in a twinkling he had caught her in his arms and was almost tearing the robe from her back.

“What the devil are you doing here, little witch ?” he asked her.

She told him in a word.

“The Emperor is at Bobr. He is a little tired of me, mon ami, so you see I waited for you.”

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“The same Valerie, upon my soul. You have quarrelled with His Majesty! There could be no better news. I salute you, fair Impératrice, and, by St. Christopher, I will have supper with you.”

She came up to me now, and greeted me very prettily. After all, it was not so wonderful that we had discovered her, for she had been riding a few hours ahead of us these many days, and this post-house was just such a place as her wit would choose for a bivouac. I told her as much, while chiding her faithlessness.

“Léon has ceased to eat since you went,” said I; and God knows that that was somewhere near the truth.

Well, we all sat down, while she commanded the Russians to serve us. The place was well enough after our night in the woods, and it did a man good to breathe its warm air and smell the savour of its primitive cooking. Not only had we the soup, but the fellow in charge produced a bottle of excellent Warsaw gin, and the first thing we did was to drain a glass to our reunion.

“We must not separate again until we cross the Pont de Jena,” says Léon, catching mademoisellè’s hand and looking deep into her eyes.

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The words were cheering, and such as a good supper might prompt a man to speak. Alas ! hardly were they uttered than we heard the blare of bugles, and, leaping to her feet, Valerie cried out that they were the Cossacks.

IV

Now here we were, hoist by our own petard. We had cast aside the heavy capes of the Russians as we entered the room, and thrown down their busbies, but, as upon a common impulse, we caught them up again when we heard the blare of the bugles, and, running to the window, peered out, to see the whole street full of hussars, and a couple of their officers beating upon the door of the post-house.

"It is the regiment that passed us on the road," said I; "eight hundred men, at a hazard. What the devil now, my nephew? We are caught like rats in a trap!"

He looked very serious, to be sure, while mademoiselle had turned as white as a sheet. Presently it seemed to dawn upon her that we were wearing Russian uniforms, and at that she got an idea.

"Go there!" she cried, indicating the low seats by the stove. "I will deal with them.

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You must pretend to sleep. It is your only chance."

We obeyed her instantly. Léon upon the left hand of the stove, and myself upon the right, we smothered our heads in the capes and curled ourselves up as men heavy with fatigue. Hardly had we done this when Valerie opened the door and the Russians swarmed headlong into the room. So great was their need of food that some twenty of them were about the table in an instant, eating as ravening wolves, and far too busy in that employment to pay any attention to us.

Looking at them as I lay, I perceived that they were all officers of cavalry, and mostly men of some distinction; while it was also apparent that they contemplated no considerable halt in this vicinity, but were riding toward the Bérézina. For all that, our situation could well justify them in shooting us like dogs if we had been discovered; and it was impossible to forget that they had but to lift the capes which covered us to undo our little plot in a twinkling. Do you wonder that we lay there as men who waited for a sentence of life or death?

Meanwhile, be sure that Mademoiselle Valerie was not idle.

Many times have I admired the wit and

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resource of that wonderful woman, but never as I did upon that fateful night. Anyone who had heard her would have sworn that she was the arch-enemy of Napoleon and of all his works, and that nothing but the direst necessity had carried her into the train of his army. With a candour which seemed childish she recited to them all that she had not done these many days. I could have laughed aloud at the fables she invented for the benefit of these simpletons. It was as inspiring as wine to see her smoking their little paper cigars and drinking the horrid gin to their successes. And all the time Léon and I lay there wondering if the filthy Russians round about would utter the word which betrayed us. To this day I believe that they did not for mademoiselle's sake.

It was otherwise with the cavalymen themselves. When they had eaten and drunk they naturally drew near the stove, and soon there were a dozen of them swarming about it, and one actually sitting upon my knees. A more anxious moment is not to be described ; and when the fellow began to banter me in Russian upon the profundity of my sleep I thought for a truth that all was lost.

The spirit had mounted to their heads by this time, and they were disposed to any humour that occurred to them. An imp of

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mischievousness prompted an ensign among them to suggest that Léon should be lifted on to the stove, and there left to roast until he came to his senses; and this idea was applauded by them all. Lifting my nephew by the legs, his ragged and mud-stained French breeches were laid bare for all to see; but, oddly enough, no one remarked the colour, and this I set down to the fact that clothes were often exchanged between the army in those days, and that a Russian with a hole in his breeches made no bones at all about wearing those of a Frenchman.

The danger was really from the fire itself, and the loud oaths it brought to Léon's lips. He was up and awake in an instant now, and with a curse upon them all he struck right and left, and brought them to their senses. They were just like men who handled a dog, to discover suddenly that he was a wolf and had bitten them; and with amazed cries they drew back and turned to mademoiselle. She, however, answered them with one of her merry laughs. The little Russian that I knew permitted me to see that she was warning them against some peril of which they were unaware; and no sooner was this done than they apprehended the danger for themselves.

You will understand this more readily when

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you remember that the post-house was on the high road, and that while the van of the army was then at Bobr, the rearguard, under Marshal Ney, had yet to march through. The outposts of this had entered the village while the officers were at supper, but the main body now appearing, the others made an immediate descent upon the post-house, and the shots and bullets rained upon it like hail. In a twinkling the plates upon the table went flying, the glass of the windows was shattered, and the crazy lamps put out.

The Russians themselves, believing that they had been taken in an ambush, went headlong through the back door of the building in quest of their horses ; and soon we heard them rallying in the village street, and crying to their fellows to come out. The alarm had spread like wildfire, and such an appeal was not made in vain. The whole hamlet now became a scene of battle, upon which the moon shone brightly and the lamps in the house cast a derisive aureole. Odd that men should be killing each other upon that terrible night of winter, with food and shelter all about and nothing but the wilderness of death beyond ! Yet so it befell, and such was the affair in which we now played our parts.

Naturally, we got out into the street as

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quickly as possible. We were both armed with pistols and had our swords drawn, but it was apparent that we could do nothing until the others had made good their entrance and got at the cavalry. The latter, finding themselves attacked on both sides, rode up and down the wide street like madmen, cutting and slashing at invisible figures, and plainly drunk with the hospitality they had pillaged. So much our own men perceived, and, advancing from house to house, and taking cover wherever it was to be had, they fired at the enemy with deadly effect, and blotted the snow with the figures of the terrified horsemen who had been caught in this trap of fate.

Soon the place became a veritable shambles. The infantrymen, under Marshal Ney himself, grew bolder every instant, and, led both by the marshal and Prince Eugène, they came out into the open, and took the cavalry at the bayonet's point. There was no longer the necessity for Léon and myself to be spectators of the affray, and, rushing out into the *mêlée*, we shot and sabred where we could. Wiser men would have remained in the post-house, and remembered the uniform they wore. I shall not soon forget the instant when some *chasseurs à pied* rushed upon me, and I had

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to cry "Vive l'Empereur!" with all my lungs to keep their bayonets from my throat. This, however, was but an episode, and, throwing the Cossack's cape and busby aside, I fought bareheaded until the last of the Russians had staggered to the post-house and fallen headlong at the feet of Valerie, who stood waiting and watching at the door.

I say the last of the Russians, and this is to give you a fair account of it. A few, it is true, got away through the court of the house to the open fields beyond; there may have been one or two who made good their escape on their way to Bobr; but of some five hundred who entered the village there were more than two hundred and fifty dead in the wide street, and almost as many prisoners when the end came.

We ourselves, amazed both at the swiftness of the victory and at our own good fortune, returned immediately to the post-house, and there found Valerie bending over the figure of the fallen Russian. The man had received a terrible blow from a sabre, which laid open his head almost to the ear, and he was stone dead when we found him. To us he was as one of the many whose bodies lay black and stiff in the moonlight, but to Valerie St. Antoine he had told another story.

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“ I know him well,” she exclaimed. “ He is General Kutusoff’s aide-de-camp. Search his wallet, and you will know why he is on the road to Bobr. Do you not understand how much it may mean to His Majesty ? ”

We heard her with amazement, but did not lose a moment in doing her bidding. There were many papers and letters in the dead man’s sack, but we knew enough to detect those of importance, and especially to pick out the documents which concerned the Emperor. Here Mademoiselle Valerie’s knowledge of Russian was something beyond price. One by one she read the documents and told us their contents. When she came to that concerning the Bérézina, the miracle of this man’s death in such a place was beyond compare the event of that memorable night.

In a word, the paper told us that the bridge across the river was held by the Russians, and that if His Majesty and the army were not to perish another must be found.

V

I HAVE told you that Marshal Ney himself had come in at the head of the rearguard, and to him we carried the paper immediately.

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Be sure the importance of it was not lost upon him, and he heard us with an amazement akin to our own.

Naturally, such a man would lose no time in such an emergency, and, entering the post-house but to write a dispatch, he handed it to Léon, and commanded him to press on at all hazards and overtake the Emperor at Bobr.

“The fate of the army depends upon your diligence,” said he. “Lose no time, sir, and I will see that you are well rewarded.”

To this he added the order that an escort of a squadron of Prince Eugène’s own cavalry should accompany us, and with this we set out immediately upon the high road to the river.

It was now about midnight, intensely cold, but very clear and bright, and the detestable north wind but a gentle breeze. The road itself no longer traversed the terrible plains, but wound in and out of a low range of hills, which protected us a little from the rigours of the night. Unhappily, our escort was already fatigued with marching, and we had not ridden a league when it became apparent that they would hinder rather than help us. So much Léon indicated to their captain, and, bidding him return to the prince, he stated our resolution of travelling henceforth alone.

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“Two may go,” says he, “where a hundred cannot. If this news does not reach the Emperor before daybreak the army is lost. It is our only chance, captain, as you must see for yourself. Leave it to me and the major here, and we will do all that can be done.”

The captain agreed, admitting that the horses of his squadron could go no farther, and that the men were entirely unable to support the fatigues of such a venture. We left them accordingly, and pushed on henceforth alone. It was a relief to discover a road where a man could pass without stepping over the dead bodies of his comrades, and for a full hour we rode with none of those dreadful emblems of tragedy to which we had become so accustomed. In the end we entered a little defile which stood upon the brink of the forest. The high road became narrower, and was often wholly obliterated by the snow. I perceived that we were lost, and, drawing rein, I compelled my nephew to realise the extent of our misfortune.

“There are no dead here,” said I. “If the army had passed by this road, you know what we should have witnessed. The stars seem to tell me that we are too far to the north; there is nothing for it but to return as we came.”

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He cursed and swore at this, for he was as impetuous as every zealous soldier should be.

“If day finds the Emperor at Bobr,” said he, “all is lost. We should have taken a guide in the village; that is the folly of it, mon oncle. We have acted like children, and deserve what we get. Had we listened to Valerie——”

“Ah,” said I, “always the women! Well, what did she say?”

“That she would conduct us to Bobr herself. I would have named it to the marshal, but you know what he thinks of women. There is nothing for it, as you say, but to return, and God keep us from a court-martial when we get there.”

We turned about, and began to ride up the defile. A light shone through the trees almost at the head of it, and we perceived what we had overlooked on our western journey—a house standing in a clearing and lighting a welcome patch in that lonely forest. The idea came to me that these people might set us on the road, and, without waiting to ask my nephew’s opinion, I turned aside and knocked upon the door. It was opened immediately by as handsome a young Jew as I have ever seen. Alas! he could not understand a word I addressed to him, but, drawing back as one

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in great fear, he called to someone inside ; and presently there appeared a young woman as good-looking, but very much less afraid of the soldiers.

To my astonishment, a greeting in my own tongue was responded to immediately by this intelligent girl.

"Come in, messieurs," said she. "We do not fear your countrymen ; we know that the French are our friends."

I hallooed to Léon to come down to the place, and then entered the cottage. A bright lamp burned upon the table, and food was set out there. When I remembered that it must have been nearly one o'clock of the morning, the fact seemed not a little suspicious ; but a thought immediately came to me, and I turned to the girl and questioned her.

"Why are you awake at this time of night ?" said I.

She flinched at that, and could not answer me ; but I told her immediately.

"Your husband has been out to rob the soldiers who have perished," said I. "Come, be frank with me, and you shall not be punished. Has he not just come home and brought you some pretty things ? Do not be afraid to tell me, and I will see that you do not suffer."

She admitted it at length. Her excuses

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were familiar and difficult to deal with. The men who had been robbed were dead, and their friends had deserted them. Of what use was money to them? The Cossacks took everything, she said; why did we begrudge them such trifles?

To which I responded very sternly that they had rendered themselves liable to the penalty of death, and would be pardoned upon one condition only.

“Doubtless you know the way to Bobr, young man,” said I.

He did not deny it.

“Then you will conduct us there immediately. Come, where is your horse? You will have need of him.”

He swore that he had no horse, and really I believe this was true. The girl's fears had now become distressing to behold, and it was evident that she had her doubts of our honesty.

“Isidore is a very bad guide,” she exclaimed, looking at us with searching eyes. “You would do much better to take me. I know the road to Bobr. I have walked there many times.”

“Then,” said I, “if you have walked there, we are not far from our destination. I will make you a proposition, my dear. It is that you both come. Nothing will happen to your

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house for an hour or two, and you can go back to-morrow."

The suggestion appeased her, but the man still seemed afraid.

"How shall I protect her from your countrymen?" said he. "Every road is full of soldiers nowadays. You know what that means, Excellency."

He spoke in Russian, but I gathered his meaning none the less. Precious moments were being lost in this argument, and I would hear no more of it.

"By God!" said I, drawing a pistol from my belt. "If you do not start immediately I will blow your brains out."

The threat was quite sufficient. Methodically the woman caught up a heavy woollen cloak and addressed a few words to her husband in a whisper. A moment later she was haggling with me about terms, for such is the habit of these people.

"You will pay us for our trouble," she protested. "It is a long way to Bobr, messieurs, and we are very poor."

"I will give you a hundred francs if you bring me to the Emperor at daybreak," said I. And, refusing further parley, I went out to the bridle track immediately, and left them to decide. Not a little to my surprise, they

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followed me without protest, and we all set out again, the woman on Léon's saddle, the young Jew at my horse's head.

I think it was a little warmer by this time ; but this may have been due to the wooded nature of the country through which we now rode. A stranger would not have found his way in a lustre of years ; so narrow was the path, so dense the trees, that we might have entered an enchanted land full of hobgoblins and far beyond the confines of the civilised world. It was difficult to remember that the Grand Army could not have been ten leagues from us, and were marching and dying this night, as upon so many weary nights since we had left Moscow. For all that, we made good headway, and were apparently about to regain the open country, when the Jew said something to his young wife, and she translated it for our benefit.

“ We are coming to a very dangerous place,” said she. “ Your Excellencies must be prepared. There are robbers here who are a menace to all strangers. We ourselves pay them tribute—a large sum, much more than we can afford. But that concerns ourselves, and they will rob you if they can. Please, therefore, be very careful, and do not speak as you go.”

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I looked at Léon, and it was evident that the same thought was in both our minds. These brigands would very likely be the kinsmen of this engaging couple, and possibly we had been led to their lair for no other purpose than that of robbery. So I took my pistol from my holster again, and, showing it to the young Jew, I warned him.

“Robbers or no robbers,” said I, “you will be a dead man the moment you let go of my bridle rein.”

He shook his head, and professed not to understand me. It was clear, however, that he had made a pretty shrewd guess at my meaning, and he pressed on so quickly that I began to doubt my previous view of his honesty.

Was it possible that he was really afraid of this ghostly place? Well, I could understand as much. The fables of Hades never painted a gloomier abyss or a nether pit so awe-inspiring.

Sheer cliffs of sandy rock rose up to a great height on every hand. There was but a hand's breadth of sky to be seen above us; while below, far down in a crevice, there glistened the ice of a frozen rivulet. The path itself would have served for a nimble goat, but was treacherous enough for a horse. We all dismounted, and for a full hour went as moun-

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taineers upon a precipice. Then we came to a sudden halt at the young man's bidding, and listening, we heard a piercing scream echoing and re-echoing in that frightful abyss.

"Good God!" cried Léon; "they are butchering a Frenchman. A man has died by the knife. I know that sound; I have heard it too often."

The young Jew began to tremble like an aspen at this, and his wife vainly tried to comfort him. Turning to us, she whispered a reminder of her prophecy concerning the dangers of the journey.

"It is the brigand Orlof," she said. "You see what has befallen us. We must return immediately."

"Oh, come," said I; "such is not the habit of our countrymen. Who is this precious Orlof, and how many friends has he?"

She responded that it was impossible to say. There might be two or three, there might be twenty. To which I answered that we would take our chance, and pushing the young Jew on before me, I covered him with my pistol.

It was then that I discovered that madame had a great Russian pistol of her own, and was already looking to its priming. So the brigands were not her fathers and mothers after all.

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We turned the corner of the pass, and a flickering red light fell suddenly on the path before us. It came from a hole in the wall of the rock, giving access to a cave of melancholy aspect. The question whether we should pause or go on was answered by me in an instant.

“Attention!” I whispered to them, and, raising my hand, I now took command of the expedition, and crept stealthily to the aperture. Ten strides and I was up to it, and had the mystery before my eyes.

There were three of the filthiest and most revolting moujiks I have ever looked upon squatting upon the floor of a considerable cave, and they were busy dividing the property of a man who lay dead by their fireside. The latter was an officer of the fusiliers, as I could see by his epaulettes. They had hacked his head off with a scythe, which lay by the tumbled corpse, and were now counting his money.

You will understand with what feelings of rage and fury my nephew and I beheld this spectacle, and the steps we took to avenge our comrade. Hardly had I clapped eyes upon the dead fusilier than I shot point-blank at the biggest of the Russians, and saw him fall forward into the very fire he had kindled.

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The two with him sprang to their feet, uttering the shrillest cries of alarm, but Léon settled the first of them with his pistol, and, to my amazement, the young Jew shot the third.

“I am well quit of him,” said he; “there will be no more tribute next year.”

And, upon this, what must he do but dash into the cavern and seize the money and the jewels which the robber still held in his quivering fingers.

At this I confess that I laughed aloud, and had not the heart to deprive him of his plunder. Sufficient that the dead was avenged and that these assassins would butcher Frenchmen no more.

VI

THIS delay had been unfortunate, and thereafter we pressed on as fast as the difficulties of the path would permit. The night was speeding, and the fate of the French army depended upon our swiftness. The day must be an enemy if the Emperor were not discovered.

This was all very well, but we knew no more than the dead how far from Bobr we then stood; nor did the young Jew who

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guided us. Indeed, it dawned upon me after a time that he himself was lost, and knew the way no better than we. This was a terrible reflection, and led me to the bitterest reproaches upon them both. I swore that they should be shot if they had played us false ; to which the woman answered bravely enough, while the man whined an excuse which led me to doubt him more than ever. The road must be across the wide ravine which we were then entering, he declared. There was a bridle path through the thicket, and that would lead us out to the high road to Bobr. So much he said, and so little did the facts justify him.

We had now come to a wide pit, deep in snow and everywhere surrounded by the forest. Even the path by which we entered it was difficult to trace once we had been caught in the trap. And so we went, round and round, the horses often up to their girths and Isidore to his neck in the half-melted slush. Half an hour of it found the brutes exhausted and we at the end of our tether. The night had been lost, and, perhaps, the army with it. Never have I known a greater chagrin than overtook me at such an hour. To have been entrusted with so great a thing and to have failed ! Good God ! what a reckoning when next we came before His Majesty !

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All this was black in the mind when the day began to dawn and a wan glimmer of chilly light to break above the white foreground of the frozen trees.

The young Jew, who had been weeping bitterly, recovered his composure when the day broke, and, seeming to recollect himself, he declared that a shrine in the wood was the landmark, and that if we could but detect it the road also would be regained. Perhaps he would have proved a false prophet after all, but for the distant blare of a bugle, and upon it the echo of rifle-shots far away down the valley. This immediately indicated to us that we looked towards the south, and another ten minutes had not passed when madame clapped her hands and declared that she espied the shrine in a clearing of the trees.

Rarely can a mistake have been redeemed with such tragic irony as upon this fatal morning. We had lost the way and had found it—alas, too late!

It was a safe passage thereafter, and one of which I remember little. The forest became less dense from league to league, and ultimately showed us the great white plains we knew so well. Even from afar the black bodies of our dead were to be discerned. We knew that this was the road to Bobr, and, as

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our guides declared, that we stood barely a league from the hamlet itself.

Of the Jews we had now no further need, and paying them the money we had promised, we set spurs to our jaded horses and rode on at a gallop. The last I saw of Isidore and the woman showed them quarrelling over the money at the wood's edge; and this was just what one would have expected them to be doing. We had almost forgotten their existence when, some half an hour later, we set eyes upon the whitened spires and low walls of the picturesque town of Bobr. The Emperor was there, and to him we must give an account of our stewardship.

God knows it was with no fair prospect that we entered the place at the moment when the army was waking to hear the fatal news.

VII

I SAY it was with no fair prospect, and yet there is an after-word. Hardly were we in the main street of the place when we heard the clatter of horses' hoofs ahead of us, and presently we perceived a young hussar coming down the street at a canter.

“ Good God ! ” cried Léon. “ It's Valerie ! ”

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I stared with all my eyes.

“Valerie, by all that’s wonderful! Then she has followed us after all, and herself has carried the news to the Emperor. Thank God for that.”

He admitted the truth of it with a sigh.

“We shall look the biggest fools in Russia to-day,” said he.

But that I doubted.

“She is a woman,” said I, “and—well, you are the best judge of what she has done. I will wager a hundred louis that she has not said a word of our failure.”

He seemed to think it possible. Valerie herself had now drawn rein before the door of a considerable house, and there she waited for us to come up.

CHAPTER IX

WE CROSS THE BÉRÉZINA

I

THE news that the Russians had cut the bridge across the Bérézina came as a thunderclap to the army.

We had believed that we had only to cross that fatal river to find ourselves immediately in a land overflowing with milk and honey. We never thought of the long leagues lying between ourselves and the city of Paris, or remembered that this dreadful Russian winter had but just begun. Food and shelter lay beyond the river, we thought—so little did we know.

Then the news came that the Cossacks of the south had cut the bridge. The men said that we were caught like rats in a trap. Our generals were hourly in consultation. None could declare with truth that he had now any real hope of escaping death or the horrors of a Russian prison.

It was at this crisis of our fate that the

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good fortune befell me of being of some personal service to the army and to His Majesty.

We had advanced a stage upon the road to the Bérézina, and in the middle of the night of November 20th we arrived at the town of Borisoff. The Emperor's quarters were in a country mansion near the town. I myself, with Léon and Valerie St. Antoine, took refuge in a mean house occupied by the priest of the place, and, having eaten a little black bread and boiled a handful of rice (all the poor fellow could offer us), we lay about his stove to sleep.

For the others this proved easy enough. No sooner had they laid their heads upon the sheepskins which the holy father provided for us, than their deep breathing responded to the measure of their fatigue. For myself, however, there was no such refuge. I could not sleep a wink despite my weariness. Beyond that, strange visions tormented me even when awake. For this, the doom which threatened the remnant of that once great army may have been responsible. I believed that I should never see my country again—and God only knows what that meant to one who had suffered so much.

Such was my condition when I heard someone tapping faintly upon the door of the

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priest's house, and then a sound of weeping. A common instinct of self-preservation should have made me callous, for those were the days when a man would have denied meat to his own brother—yet, whether it were the hour of the night or the despair of our situation, I know not—but, rising immediately, I took the rushlight in my hand and opened to the unknown.

II

THE new-comer was dressed from head to foot in the fur of the silver fox, and had a grey woollen shawl about her head. I have rarely seen a more beautiful face upon a child or eyes so sorrowful.

Apparently of fourteen years of age or thereabouts, I perceived at once that she was of noble birth, while the sweetness of her voice was beyond words. Weeping upon the threshold, she ceased to weep directly she had entered the room, and, drawing herself up with a dignity worthy of her race, she told me that her name was Joan d'Izambert, and begged me to come immediately to the help of her brother, who was dying.

This was an astonishing request, and I could not forbear a question

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“Mademoiselle,” I asked, “who is your brother, and what brought you to this house?”

She replied immediately that her brother was Gabriel d’Izambert, one of the *pontonniere*s, and that he had been sent to the river by General Roguet. From this excursion I understood that the young man had returned in a state of delirium, and was now lying in an arbour of a garden close by.

“Sergeant Picard sent me to you,” she explained. “He knows my brother well, and said that you would come. Oh, monsieur, we have suffered so much, and now there is this. Will you not help me?”

I told her that I would go. For another, perchance, I would not have stirred a foot that night; but there was so much in the child’s manner—a gift to command and a nobility of mien which were remarkable—that I put on my great fur coat without more ado, and went down to the garden with her. It lay, perhaps, a hundred paces from the house which we occupied, and was attached to a considerable mansion, of which General Roguet and his staff had then taken possession.

The arbour itself proved to be a spacious summer-house, matted and thatched, and provided with a stove, in which a good fire had

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been kindled. I was presented immediately to a distinguished old gentleman, well advanced in years, but still wearing a uniform of the engineers. He told me in a word that he had followed his son as far as Smolensk upon our outward journey, and there had waited for the army's return.

"His mother was with us then," he said—and so he indicated that his wife had perished during these dreadful days.

The son himself—a fine young man of noble presence—lay upon the floor by the stove, wrapped in a bearskin coat, but plainly the victim of delirium. I found him in a burning fever, his pulse running high, and his cheeks gone scarlet. He raved incessantly of the river and the bridge, and of the Russians who had hunted us.

It was no new thing to hear a man talk thus at a moment when the army perished by tens of thousands; but the spectacle of this bare place, and the glowing stove, and the stricken old man, and the child that was left to him, touched me beyond words, and I promised him immediately all the help that lay in my power.

"Yet, God knows," I exclaimed, "that is little enough, for we are all likely to be in a Russian prison to-morrow. You know, sir,"

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I said, turning to him, "that the bridge is down and the army trapped."

"The bridge is down," he cried, "but another may be built. Save my son, major, and you may yet save France."

I had no idea of his meaning. If I thought of it at all, it was to remind myself that this family had suffered much, and that the father's talk might be little more rational than the son's at such a moment. Bidding the child run back to the house I had quitted, and thence bring my nephew and my case of instruments, I assured the old gentleman that I would do my best and that he might count upon me. The young man, meanwhile, did not cease to rave in a voice which was most distressing to hear, and, catching me by the hand as I bent over him, he implored me, for God's sake, to let the Emperor know immediately. When I, however, asked him for a message he could give me none. "The bridge!" he would cry, and repeat the words a hundred times. His very frenzy was a terrible thing to see.

My nephew and Mademoiselle Valerie returned to the harbour with the child anon, being anxious as to my whereabouts. Léon was frankly disgusted with the whole business, and would have had me return to the house immediately.

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“There are a thousand worse than this man for every league you march,” said he. “Really, mon oncle, this is no time for sentiment.”

In her turn, Valerie told him to be silent, and seemed really concerned at the misfortunes of the unhappy family.

“I know them well,” she said to me. “The mother is a relative of the Duke de Melun, and old General d’Izambert often came to my father’s house. Imagine the madness which brought such old people to Russia because their boy was going !”

I rejoined that it was the kind of madness which had become common in France during recent years. And this was the truth, for many a family had gone out merely because sons or brothers were there. It was clear that an unusual bond of affection united these brave people, and that the memory of the dead mother provoked a sentiment very real. Father and daughter alike watched me with pitiful eyes while I bled the young *pontonniér*, and they hastened to obey me when I commanded them to melt snow in a cup and to give him a cooling drink.

“I will speak to General Roguet at dawn,” said I. “You shall find a place for him in the house. God alone knows whether any of us

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will be here to help you then ; it depends upon his fellows. If there is no ford discovered in the next twenty-four hours, the river is shut to us, and the army is lost. You, monsieur, know that as well as I."

He assented, looking at me with grave eyes.

"Major," he said very solemnly, "there is a ford. My son discovered it this day."

The news astounded me.

"Good God !" said I. "You are speaking the truth ?"

"Look at me, major. Would I lie to you ?"

"Then the Emperor knows. You have told him, monsieur ?"

He shook his head.

"Swear by Almighty God that you will not desert us, and I will name the place to you," he said.

I knew not what to say to him — the dilemma was beyond all words. If I pledged myself to these people, then truly must I be a prisoner in Russia. If I did not pledge myself, the army was lost."

"But," I cried, "there is my regiment — my duty, Monsieur d'Izambert."

It was then that Valerie spoke.

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“Go,” she said to Léon, pointing to the door; “let the Emperor know. I will stay with these people.”

III

HERE was an astonishing turn, and one little looked for.

The idea of this dashing girl, clad in her hussar uniform, yet womanly beyond compare, the idea of her becoming the guardian of the sick man at first astounded and then delighted Monsieur d’Izambert. Helpless and infirm himself, the companion of a mere child caught in the toils of suffering, he responded warmly to such a pledge and thanked her most graciously.

The boy himself had now sunk into a kind of coma, and there were moments when I thought he was dead. Meanwhile, Léon did not return, and we waited in the silence of the night for the alarm which must presently attend the momentous tidings. When it came, it was as though the whole army woke upon the dawn of a feast-day. Bugles blared; a babel of voices arose in the street; the wagons of the engineers went through at a gallop; lights appeared in every house. Anon you heard men calling the news from door to door.

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A ford had been discovered ; the army would cross the Bérézina this day.

So they said, and such was my own belief. The young *pontonier* had given the clearest directions to old Monsieur d'Izambert before the fever overtook him, and these, marked upon his map, had gone to head-quarters. Nothing remained to be done that our engineers could not do. They would bridge the shallow stream, and the remnant of the six hundred thousand would pass over. I reflected that I should not be among them. The promise that Valerie had given bound me no less than her. Impossible to leave her here in this God-forsaken hamlet, with a sick man for her charge and a veteran of threescore years for her bodyguard. She had pledged herself to stay, and I must stand by her. It seemed to me, then, that our liberty, if not our lives, depended upon the youth, who lay alternately burning with fever and shivering with cold upon the boards at our feet. His death would have set us free. I say it with truth that neither she nor I desired freedom at such a price.

You will have understood that it was day by this time.

The bruit of alarm was still to be heard in the street before the house where the remnants

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of the army pressed on headlong towards the river. I did not suppose that we should be left to ourselves, we who possessed the precious secret of the ford, and in this I was not mistaken. Many from head-quarters came down to General Roguet's house when daylight appeared, and it must have been a little after eight o'clock when the Emperor himself strode into the harbour and demanded to see Gabriel d'Izambert.

I had not been unprepared for this, and be sure I made haste to explain the situation to His Majesty.

"Sire," I said, "the young man is overtaken by a fever, caught in the river yesterday. It will probably be but a passing attack, but meanwhile his father knows all that your Majesty should know, and you will find him very much at your service. He has at the moment gone to the house yonder in quest of necessaries; but there is one here with whom you are acquainted and whom you will not be displeased to meet again under such circumstances."

With this I presented Mademoiselle Valerie to him, and he greeted her very warmly. The young *pontonier* was still asleep, and it seemed idle to wake him. Nevertheless, the Emperor insisted, with his usual impetuosity, and

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nothing would content him but an immediate audience of this unhappy Gabriel. Judge of my astonishment when, upon being awakened, the lad seemed in possession of his normal faculties and ready to answer as though he were fresh from a healthy sleep.

“The ford is below Studianka,” he said, with a warmth of feeling which betrayed an ardent loyalty. “It is four miles above the old bridge, your Majesty, and, should the river remain as it is, the engineers could cross it before nightfall. I beg you now to let me accompany you, for I am quite well again.”

And then he said, lifting pathetic eyes which betrayed his youthful earnestness, “Your Majesty will not refuse me this last favour?”

Such was his request, which won an immediate assent from the Emperor. The lives of a hundred thousand men may have depended upon this youth's loyalty, and who would count the loss of his life if thereby the army could pass over? Not I, certainly.—nor His Majesty, who never stood at a sentiment where his own interests were concerned. Half an hour had not elapsed when Gabriel d'Izambert had been lifted into one of the baggage wagons, and we had all set out for the Bérézina.

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Put briefly, it was a race where life or death was the stake. If we could neither ford nor bridge the river by nightfall, assuredly was the Grand Army lost. There was not a man amongst us who did not know as much as we drew near to the fatal scene and set eyes for the first time upon those waters which had baffled us. Had the river risen during the night, or should we find it as Gabriel d'Izambert had found it yesterday? The lad himself put the question a hundred times as we tramped by the side of the wagon, and descended at length toward that gloomy Styx which was so soon to be the scene of our overwhelming desolation.

IV

NATURALLY, I considered myself released at this time from my understanding with the old gentleman. He, however, was of no such opinion, and, with an anxiety very natural under the circumstances, he reminded me frequently of the undertaking.

"You will not leave us, major," he said. "We are so very helpless, and you see what is about to happen to my son. We cannot leave him, and, if the bridge be built, naturally the army will be the first to cross. Remember

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what you have promised me, and let it be an honourable understanding between us."

It was difficult to answer such an appeal, and, for that matter, a greater anxiety concerning the state of the river led me to dismiss it lightly. What mattered it whether we crossed early or late if the army could be saved and the honour of France upheld? These thoughts were in my mind when, at length, the Bérézina came into view and all that gloomy panorama was unrolled before our wistful eyes. Let me tell you of this that you may understand more fully the calamity which subsequently overtook us.

As we first saw it, the Bérézina did not appear to be a formidable river. It ran beneath a sky heavy with cloud and through a marsh, of which the thaws of recent days had made nothing but a treacherous bog.

When it first came into view there were some thousands of the Fusiliers and Chasseurs of the Guard encamped upon its eastern bank. A drizzle of snow fell, and it was clear that the waters of the river had begun to flow with some rapidity. Little waves lapped the marshy shore; great blocks of ice went careering here and there as though they were monstrous fish at play. The wind moaned dismally and the damp searched our very bones.

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Of shelter there was none, save that of a few miserable huts upon the hillside and of a low farmhouse, which the general's staff now occupied. Luckily for us, we took possession of one of the former, and there I left Valerie with Monsieur d'Izambert and his daughter, while I myself rode on to the river to get what tidings I could. These, to be sure, were not of ill-omen, and the fact that they were not so is to be set down to the bravery of the gallant fellows who were then working for our salvation.'

Never in all the story of a retreat can there be a more glorious page written than that which told of our own *pontonni*ers on this famous day of November.

Let me tell you in brief words that, despite the bitter cold, the snow which beat upon their faces and the icy water of the river, they plunged boldly into the stream, and stood there, often working up to their necks, that the bridge which should save the army might be built. The feat has been made light of by subsequent writers; yet here I bear witness that a nobler thing was never done, nor any task achieved so heroically in all the years of His Majesty's victories.

Imagine it, my friends, and think upon our situation.

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We knew that the Russians were to the north and the south of us. The ancient bridge below Borisoff had been cut. If we could not ford this icy stream, then death or the horrors of a Russian prison awaited us. Our one hope was this determined band of ten, who offered their own lives upon the altar of our safety and plunged into the river that they might win it for us.

Hour by hour we watched them with feverish eyes. Even the Emperor came down to the place, and with his own hand served wine to those heroes who were winning life for him. One by one the pontoons were moored, and the gap between the coveted shores made narrower.

To me it seemed as though it were a race between Fate and the fortunes of France. I saw the river rising every hour ; the moaning wind became a dreadful thing to hear as the day waxed and waned. And ever through the terrible hours the snow fell pitilessly and the ice gathered and crashed in the torrent which lashed the pontoons.

Would our fellows win by nightfall, or was all indeed lost ? I answered the question for myself when, at sunset, the triumphant cries of the fusiliers announced that a communication with the opposite shore was established,

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and I saw the Guard ride over, their trumpets blaring and their eagles proudly proclaiming their victory.

A few minutes later I myself rode over the bridge, and immediately rode back again. It was something to feel that the devilish stream was conquered and the fruits of brave men's toil reaped to the full. Alas, how little I knew of what was to come after or of the slaughter which must attend the unspeakable morrow!

I have told you that I crossed the bridge and immediately recrossed it. This was upon an order of General Roguet himself, who told me that every surgeon would be needed upon the other side to help the sick across, and that I must rejoin our own company of *Vélites* as quickly as might be. It had never been in my head to desert old Monsieur d'Izambert and his daughter, and I sought them out directly I had recrossed to the eastern bank. My nephew was with them at this time, but Gabriel d'Izambert had not yet returned from the river, nor did any know his whereabouts. Naturally, we hoped that he had gone across with the Fusiliers of the Guard, but the old gentleman refused to believe that he had done so, and was already determined to spend the night in the shepherd's hut. Here he was well enough, and, for that matter, I thought

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we had all done wisely to camp where we were rather than to find an open bivouac on the farther shore.

That this was the general opinion the scene upon our side of the river quickly made manifest. Far to the north and south of the twin bridges which the *pontonniere*s had now erected were the bivouac fires and the camps of the gathered remnants. Baggage wagons began to roll up, and their attendants to gather in hundreds, eyeing the dismal waters and promising to cross at dawn. No one seemed to think that there was any hurry or that it mattered where he slept to-night. In truth, I think the army believed that a great moral victory had already been won, and that the end of its sufferings was at hand. Let them but cross the river, and the fair fields of France would beckon them. Again I say that they had forgotten the bitter leagues which lay between them and liberty.

My own duty at this time was to see to the sick of our own-regiment, and to provide for their crossing. Here I found willing helpers. We collected the wagons with their unhappy burdens, and drew them up as near to the river as we dared. Why they were not sent across that night, I cannot tell you. When I recall the precious hours that we wasted,

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the solitude of the bridges, and the miracle of the opportunity, it seems to me that no words can describe truly the magnitude of that blunder. Yet there it was, and so at length we slept during the long hours of storm and darkness. When we awoke the Russians were upon the hills about us, and their shells were already thundering upon our bivouac. God, what an awakening for men who had hoped so much!

V

THE sound of cannon broke in upon our sleep a little after the hour of dawn.

We had made a comfortable bivouac in the hut, and were all dozing in the straw which covered its floor, when the earth about us began to tremble, and everyone started up to realise the dread alarm.

It chanced that I was lying cheek by jowl with Valerie St. Antoine, and that we were the first of them all to run into the open and ascertain the truth. It needed but a single glance at the hills and the river to tell us that story in all its menace.

It was just light at this time—a colder morning than that of yesterday, with a clearer heaven. As the clouds of night rolled away,

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the black figures of the Cossacks upon the hills were clearly to be discerned, while the smoke of their cannon drifted slowly upon the still air and hovered above the swirling river. It was plain that a considerable force had come up in the night, and, having discovered our intention, began immediately to fire upon the bridges. We could see their cannon-balls plumping into the water, striking the floes of driving ice, or even rending the frail pontoons which our engineers had moored with such difficulty. And while they did this a cry of horror ran from end to end of our own encampment—the cries of those who believed that delay had undone them, and that they were betrayed.

From every camp fire now, from the shelter of puny huts and caves dug out of the earth, from wagons and tents, there appeared a stream of men and women, too, camp followers who mingled with the soldiery and cursed or entreated as the mood dictated.

Standing upon a knoll not a hundred paces from the bridge, Mademoiselle Valerie and I were soon enveloped by these pitiful creatures, who ran to and fro like driven sheep, and had lost what little wit they had possessed. It was a dreadful thing to see women of all ages, with the tears streaming down their faces, their

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hair unkempt and their dress but a tatter of rags, throwing themselves at the feet of officers as helpless as they, and begging instantly to be escorted across the bridge. Yet such was the scene into which I was now plunged, and such the disorderly mob with which the remnant of the army had to deal. As for ourselves, it did not seem very much to matter what we did.

Mademoiselle Valerie, as imperturbable as ever, addressed words of comfort to the unhappy people and begged them to be patient.

"The soldiers will protect you," she said; and, God knows, how much I wished that the boast could be made good.

We, however, were as helpless as they, and, when we found ourselves alone, the truth was not to be concealed.

"They will destroy the bridge, Monsieur Constant," she said; "and what then? Is there anyone here who can tell us what to do?"

I rejoined that wiser heads would have told us last night, and reminded her that we had the old man and the child to think of.

"The bridge must be crossed at any cost," said I. "Convince the old gentleman of that, and we will set out immediately. It is idle to stop here on the supposition that his son

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will return. Do you not see yourself how unreasonable it is ? ”

She agreed with me, and returned immediately to the hut. Unfortunately, we had to deal with the obstinacy of a father to whom the only son was all that mattered in this world. Monsieur d'Izambert refused to move a step until the young *pontonier* had returned. Nor would he hear of our escorting his daughter across the river.

“ We will cross together,” he said, “ or we will not cross at all. My daughter would wish it, major. How would it help her to return to France when those dear to her remain the prisoners of this unhappy country ? You do not know what you are asking me—to leave my only son ; it is impossible.”

I saw that nothing would convince him, and taking Valerie aside, I told her as much.

“ It will be a case of *sauve qui peut*,” said I. “ We are under no obligation to these people, and why should we perish because of them ? Come with me now, and, if it is possible to do so, I will recross the river later in the day. I pledge my word upon that. But, mademoiselle,” said I, “ it is madness for you to listen to them.”

She shook her head, smiling in the old, alluring way.

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“It has all been madness,” she exclaimed; and that was as true a thing as ever she said.

“We shall stand a better chance to-night, Monsieur Constant, than now, when there are so many on the bridge,” she continued. “Let us wait upon our opportunity. Surely you would not attempt the passage at this moment?” And she pointed to the bridges, thronged already by a terrified mob, and pounded by the cannon of the Russians.

My answer to this was a shrug of the shoulders, for no other seemed possible.

Any man who was at the Bérézina will understand the terror and pity of the scene I now witnessed and the helplessness of any Frenchman who stood upon the eastern bank of the cursed river.

As a hail of death, the shells and the bullets of the Russians poured down upon the terror-stricken fugitives. Dreadful cries arose. So great was the press upon the pontoons that hundreds of our people were thrust headlong into the swirling waters, hundreds of the weak crushed beneath the feet of the stronger. All huddled together—wagons driven over living men, cavalry hewing their way with swords, the cries of cantinières, women and children screaming for pity—all, I say, pressed on in

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that mad quest of shelter which was to be offered to so few.

Soon the river was black with the bodies of the drowned. I saw wretched creatures clinging to the ice-floes or the pontoons of the bridge; some fighting as devils for a foothold upon the narrow way; others too weak to struggle as the strong thrust them aside and the black water enveloped them. Wisely indeed had Valerie insisted upon delay. Yet it was a melancholy thing to reflect that even an hour before the day had dawned we might all have passed over in safety and set out upon our way to the Paris of our dreams.

I shall not weary you with any undue recital of the horrors of that unnameable day. From dawn to dusk the slaughter continued. It was a tragic moment indeed when the Russians at length destroyed the greater bridge, and with it a regiment of cavalry of the Guard then passing over. This was quite early in the day, and thereafter the scenes upon the pontoons became beyond all words awful to witness. Even the bravest were as helpless as children in that terrible *lutte pour la vie*. I remember, about one o'clock in the afternoon, riding down to the water's edge with my old friend Gros-Jean of the Vélites, and watching the frantic endeavour that most

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courageous of men made to cross the bridge, despite my entreaties. Alas! he had but plunged into the medley when a Cuirassier of the Guard thrust him down, and he, in turn, clinging to his aggressor's cloak, they rolled headlong on to a great floe of ice, and were presently engulfed with the thousands the insatiable waters already had claimed. Who in the face of such scenes would have advised a woman and an old man to dare the transit? Not I, in truth, whatever the cost.

The miseries of our own situation will now be perceived by all. We had refrained from crossing upon a quixotic impulse, and it seemed that our sacrifice had cost us our liberty if not our lives. Hour by hour the Cossacks were drawing nearer, their fire becoming more terrible and their hosts more plainly to be seen. Night must find them down upon us, or we ourselves but units amidst the maddened people who fought like wild beasts for a foothold on the bridge. Even old Monsieur d'Izambert began to perceive the folly of it as the day waxed and waned, and vainly he waited for the son who did not return.

"We should have crossed," he said; "Gabriel must have gone with the Emperor."

So much I believed to be the truth until about the hour of five o'clock, when to our

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great astonishment the young *pontonniér* himself appeared at the hut, and carried that dire intelligence which was all that was needed to consummate our despair.

“I am to blow up the bridge,” he said. “It is by the Emperor’s orders. We must save the army; the others must perish.”

We did not answer him. To such had our mistaken folly led us. It was death or the Russian prison indeed; there could be no alternative.

VI

You will see the nature of the difficulty which now confronted us.

It was almost certain death to venture upon the bridge; the alternative meant that we faced the Cossacks and accepted grace at their hands.

To myself, an old soldier who had served His Majesty so many years, it mattered little now what befell me. So much had I suffered, so bitter had been the days, that any shelter—even that of a prison, in which I could eat and sleep—would have been a welcome harbourage from this march of death.

But for Valerie St. Antoine, she who had carried herself so bravely during the terrible

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weeks, she who had served France with such valour and loyalty—that she should become the prisoner and the victim of these devils, was indeed the last calamity. What to say to her in the face of the Emperor's order I knew not. The bridge must be destroyed to save His Majesty. Would she deny the necessity of that?

These thoughts were in my mind when I took her aside and questioned her as to the course we should pursue. To my astonishment I found that she herself had already debated the question, and that her mind was made up.

“We must swim the river, Monsieur Constant,” she said; “you and I. Let Joan go with us. Monsieur d’Izambert will not leave his son. I do not blame him, but now we must think of ourselves.”

It was a bold response, and yet I will not say that I had not thought of it.

From time to time during the hours of the day's agony I had seen intrepid cavalry men go down to the swirling Bérézina, and boldly put their horses to the water. Few who did so had lived. Some were struck by Russian bullets, and died in the saddle. The horses of others, overcome by the cold, sank without warning, and dragged their masters with them.

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A few gained the marsh upon the opposite shore, and either breasted it or ended their sufferings there. All this we had witnessed, together, and yet, as Valerie said, it was the only way—the river or the prison! Do you wonder that our choice was soon made?

We returned to the hut, and, taking Monsieur d'Izambert aside, I put the alternatives to him.

"Your son," said I, "is a very noble fellow. Be sure, monsieur, that his name will not be forgotten when the story of this day is told. The command which has been given him is a very great compliment. No doubt he will be clever enough to save himself when he has done his duty; but we must now save ourselves. It would be a madman's task to attempt to cross the bridge at such a time. There is only one way, and it is that which Mademoiselle Valerie and I propose to take."

And then I told him of our intention to swim the river.

"Your daughter," said I, "may go upon my saddle-bow. If you yourself have a mind for the venture, I will find you a horse quickly enough. The decision must rest with you. We have no time to lose, for the river is rising every hour. If you decide to remain here, being a civilian and a non-combatant, I doubt

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if the Russians will trouble you. That, monsieur, is for you to say. I will save your daughter if I can; the rest is in the hands of God."

He was much distressed, but he did not fail to perceive the realities of the situation. His love for his son touched me deeply, and when he declared that he would remain with Gabriel, I could not gainsay him.

"Save Joan," he said, putting both his hands into mine. "If the time should ever come that we meet again in Paris, I will never forget this day, Major Constant. I am an old man, and it can matter little to me now—but the child has all her life before her."

I thought it a wise resolution, and told him as much.

"We will wait for you on the other side," said I, though in my heart I doubted if I should ever see him there. Then, bidding him be of good courage, and taking a cordial farewell of his son, I set out immediately.

Valerie awaited me on the brink of the river. Her black charger appeared to be as fresh as though he had left his stable at Moscow but yesterday; her uniform of hussars was as trim and well kept as any good soldier might have desired. As for little Joan, the tale we had told her was one which a child would not

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question. We were to carry her across the river, and her father and brother would follow presently in the baggage wagons. She believed us with a child's faith, and, being drawn up upon the saddle before me, she asked when we would cross the bridge. Then I told her the truth.

"You see for yourself," said I, "what a dreadful place the bridge now is. We are going to swim the river, *ma petite*, and in that way we shall cheat the Russians. Now, cling to me with both your arms, and do not mind what happens. Why should you be afraid?"

She told me very proudly that she was not, and, calling to Valerie, I put my horse at the water.

The place might have been some twenty yards from the first pontoon, and for awhile the good beast which carried me found ground for his feet. In those moments I could see how wise we had been to prefer the hazard of the water to that of the bridge. Such a scene as was then taking place upon that frail structure has surely never been witnessed in all the story of His Majesty's wars.

Pell-mell upon it went wagons and cannon and the terrified camp-followers. Horsemen cut their way as though sabreing an enemy;

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women screamed with terror ; the strong were dragged down with the weak ; men trampled one another under foot without a thought of mercy. The number of the dead and dying no man might estimate, and over these the living crawled as they could, the Russian shells falling ceaselessly amidst them, and the deadly bullets finding many a billet.

All this I beheld as in some swift vision of horror, from which the eyes turned almost with gratitude to the fetid waters about me. The swirling torrent, the crashing of the ice-floes, the bobbing corpses everywhere but fostered that pursuit of safety which now grew upon me as a fever. I must win the opposite shore, I said, or all were lost. Let me but set foot upon those black slopes which were the goal of my desire and all were won by this supreme endeavour. It was easy to be said, but how remote the hope of it !

I should tell you that the darkness had now come down, and with it a return of the bitter cold.

I had caught the child up with my left arm, and, giving the good horse his head, I felt the water strike me suddenly with a deadly chill, and heard Joan's shrill cry of horror as at length the current caught us and we were swept away into the vortex of the river.

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Now, indeed, we stood face to face with Death and felt his icy hand upon us.

The screams of the dying upon the bridge, the thunder of the cannon, the moaning of the bullets—all were lesser sounds than that of the crashing ice and the roaring torrent as it threatened to engulf us. What had become of Valerie St. Antoine I knew not. It seemed to me that I had been carried in an instant from human enemies to wage a combat with Nature omnipotent, before which I must perish. The chill of the water, the freezing wind, the sleet which beat upon my face were the weapons with which this pitiless enemy would have conquered me. Nothing but the instincts of the gallant brute stood between me and the watery grave so many had found. On he pressed and on, fighting as a human thing for the life no less precious to him than to us. I saw dead men's eyes looking up at me from the black torrent; human arms, outstretched but lifeless, touched my flesh and set the child shrieking with terror. The shells fell about us and the foam was as a blinding fountain in our eyes. Yet ever the coveted shore seemed more distant, the sounds of human strife yet farther away, the world gone clean from our knowledge. It is here, then, said I to myself, that Janil de Constant must

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die. God knows that I would have welcomed death if it could have come quickly.

Such were the episodes of that fateful crossing, through which the mercy of the Almighty alone brought us safely.

I had given up all hope, when a sudden staggering of the horse, a cry from Joan, and another shout of triumph from the bank itself bade me look up and understand the wonder of the moment. We had touched the shore—that shore of all our dreams, and found a footing there. Valerie herself, the water running from her boots, but her eyes triumphant and her arms outstretched, welcomed us with a woman's laughter and claimed the victory.

We had crossed the Bérézina! The horrors of the bridge were done with for ever; we were amid our comrades, and yonder beyond the forgotten leagues stood Paris and our homes.

VII

WE crossed the bog with safety and reached the first of the low hills on the hither shore. Hardly had we done so when a loud explosion shook the very earth and caused us to wheel about suddenly. Then we saw the bridge fall asunder, and knew that the thousands upon

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the far bank were doomed to death or the prison. Such a cry as arose from our comrades yonder has never been heard, nor will be again, I believe, in all the story of the world. It was the voice of the ultimate woe of those who, hoping much, now ceased to hope, and fearing, now feared the more. Many have accused the Emperor of wanton cruelty because of what he did on that November night. Yet we, who served France, believed that he had done well, and we would have laid down our lives for him as readily had the honour of our country demanded it.

Naturally, we said nothing to Joan of the meaning of this tragic event. Assuring her that Gabriel and her father would join us at dawn, we rode on to the first of the bivouacs, where, happily, we found a squadron of the fusiliers, under Colonel Bourgoriau, well known to me, and by him were instantly made welcome. The Emperor, he told us, was camped at a farmhouse not a quarter of a mile from where we stood. His Majesty was cold and suffering, and they had sent wood for his fires, badly as they needed it themselves.

Here I left Valerie and the child, and, returning to the remnant of the bridge, I waited to see if any might yet be saved. Alas! the stranded pontoons showed me but a heap of

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dying and dead, and some of them were in flames. It may have been the mere fancy of a man whose courage had been sorely tried that day, but amongst those whom the swirling river carried away, and upon whose faces the leaping fires cast a golden aureole, I thought that I saw Gabriel the brave and the father who had loved him.

CHAPTER X

THE LAST REVIEW

I

THE loss of the Grand Army at the River Bérézina will never be fully told.

All the world knows now that more than twelve thousand corpses were taken from the river when the ice melted in the spring ; but this is to give no account of the many who were butchered by the Cossacks, and of the thousands of unhappy men, and women too, who went into the Russian prisons when the last of the bridges was blown up.

We were a mere remnant that got away in safety.

I have heard the number variously estimated, but in my own opinion no more than thirty thousand of those who marched to Moscow so proudly struggled on towards Kovno when the battle of the Bérézina had been fought.

At this time, too, we were so many hordes of miserable men rather than an army. Many

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lost the road and wandered for weeks in the frozen wilderness. Hardly a regiment preserved anything of its original formation ; those that did so were inspired by loyalty to His Majesty the Emperor. When he left us at Smorgoni on the morning of December 5th and entrusted the command to Murat all order was finally done with. The Cossacks pursued us as sheep are hunted by wolves. We struggled into Vilna, to find the town plundered. The mighty host which had set out to conquer Russia now rotted beneath the snows of the steppes we had crossed.

It was every man for himself afterwards, as you can well imagine. We made up little companies of friends and went together in the fashion of the East. Naturally, Valerie St. Antoine was of my own party ; and with the child Joan and my own nephew Léon we had Sergeant Bardot, who had been with us in the adventure at Moscow. I have told you of the sergeant's adroitness, and we found him invaluable these later days. Where others starved he would plunder. From a brawl at Vilna, when the stores were rifled, Gustav Bardot emerged with as many bottles of brandy as would have made a regiment drunk, and a supply of flour under which our horses staggered. With this we set out almost gaily

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upon our journey to the Prussian frontier. France seemed near to us now, though so many hundreds of leagues away.

To be sure we lost the road frequently enough, and were yet to meet with some surprising adventures. It is of one of the most curious of these that I am now about to write.

II

It was the second day after our leaving Kovno.

We had slept in a stable in that unhappy town and there had fallen in with Sergeant Bardot and his plunder.

I remember that it was a dreadful night, the roar of the wind almost drowning the sound of the distant artillery, which we believed to be fired at our rearguard by the Russians. It has been said since that day that Marshal Ney himself fired the guns to drive the stragglers into the town. I cannot tell you how it was, but I know that we all suffered very much, especially the child Joan, who mourned ceaselessly for her father and her brother.

Next morning we set out for the bridge across the Niemen. It was almost as great a press as that at the Bérézina. Happily, the

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Cossacks had not yet come up, and we got across at length to find an open country where there were few signs of an army marching.

Very shortly afterwards we lost all track of the vanguard, and were mere stragglers with a few others upon a great white plain which the wind swept pitilessly. That night we bivouacked in the barn of an ancient farmhouse which marauders had burned. It was there that we determined to go our own way henceforth and not to rejoin the regiment until we came to Elbing.

“Why should we?” old Bardot asked in his matter-of-fact way. “There will be no fighting, my friends; and if there be, the marshal will take care of those fellows. No one expects the Cossacks to cross the Niemen, and if they are wise they will now go back to their own country. We have food enough for some days and our horses are good. Let us make a caravan as the Easterns do, and leave the rest to Providence.”

This was very sensible advice, and it fell upon willing ears. We were a genial company, and if my nephew spent most of his hours in close converse with Valerie St. Antoine, at least I had the benefit of the sergeant's company. As for little Joan, she rarely spoke to anyone; or, if she did, it was to raise again

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that fatal question of her father's whereabouts. For all these reasons I deemed it wise to do as Bardot directed, and to seek a route of our own. We should find the remnant of the army at Elbing; it would be time enough to think of re-formation when we arrived there.

So behold us crossing those fearsome steppes, Valerie and Léon for our van, the sergeant and myself, with the child between us, talking of a thousand things which were to be done if ever we saw the city of Paris again. We had come by this time to believe that we should do so, and despite the sufferings which we endured our courage remained unshaken. Alas! that it was so soon to be put to the proof. We were hopelessly lost upon the evening of the third day, and knew no more than the dead whether we were marching to Elbing or to the sea.

Remember that the heaven above us had been perpetually obscured by cloud and that the night showed us no stars. The plain in itself was a vast sea of snow, broken rarely by clumps or pines and hardly showing us a house which had not been burned by the army on its outward march. From time to time, it is true, we espied little companies of stragglers in the far distance, or groups of horsemen

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poised upon a knoll; but of the high road we saw nothing, and gradually it began to dawn upon us that even Bardot's store was not inexhaustible, and that we must surely perish in this wild place unless we recovered the high road speedily.

We slept that night in a dismal wood, listening to the howling of the wolves and but ill-protected by the snow-pit we had digged. The others were merry enough save little Joan, whose strength could not support these hardships and for whose safety we were all tenderly solicitous. Fortunately, we had more than one great-coat of fur with us, and we made the child a bed in the snow as well as we could, and then fell to talking of our position.

Old Bardot's plan clearly had broken down, and it remained to find another. Should we waste the precious hours trudging northward on the chance that the high road lay there, or should we hold our course and risk the discovery of a town or village in our path? Bardot was for the latter plan; Valerie for the former.

"I have friends in Elbing," she said. "Prince Nicholas visited the city frequently, and if we ever reach the town I am sure they will welcome me. We cannot do wrong

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to go to the north, for the sea will soon tell us where we are. Here it is a wilderness where none but madmen would remain."

She looked at the sergeant as she spoke; and, in truth, there never had been much love lost between those two. His defence of himself was lame but valiant.

"We should have been pillaged upon the high road," he said truculently. "It was wiser to do as we have done."

Her answer was that we had now nothing to pillage. The argument threatened to grow heated when, to our great surprise, we heard the barking of a watch-dog, and, all springing to our feet, we discovered that the sound came from the far side of the wood and that a human habitation must be there.

III

TEN minutes later we were knocking at its door. It proved to be a little farmhouse kept by Poles—a widow and two sons—and they were greatly alarmed when we waked them. Our civilities presently obtained admittance, and we found ourselves in a long, low room with a wood fire burning brightly, and about it some evidence of an unexpected prosperity.

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Fine skins decorated the walls of this mean habitation. There were guns in the corner by the chimney, and among them some French weapons obviously taken from our own soldiers. A handsome drinking cup in silver stood upon a shelf which harboured good china; while a little shrine with candles denoted that the people were of the Catholic faith.

I thought them all strikingly handsome; the lads were dark, with intelligent eyes; the old woman looked a picture of almost saintly sweetness and benignity. With Valerie she was at home directly, and it was good to see the conquest which the French beauty made so quickly.

The result of this was immediate. We had not been in the farm ten minutes when the table was spread with viands and a bottle of French brandy set before us. Of the sons, one waited upon us and the other went out, as the old woman said, to cut wood. I thought it a little odd that he remained away so long, but the circumstance escaped my notice presently when rugs were spread upon the floor and our beds made ready.

So weary were we all that we lay down upon the floor without any ceremony, and the last I remember before going to sleep were the whispers of Valerie and my nephew, who,

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I doubt not, were telling each other an ancient story. When I awoke a light sound in the room disturbed me. I sat up and looked about me, bewildered by the flickering rays of the ebbing fire and uncertain for the moment where I was.

We all experience this in strange places, but a soldier usually is not at a loss. Upon this occasion, whether it were the unusual aspect of the room, the circumstances of our bivouac, or the treacherous firelight, I cannot tell you, but moments passed before I remembered our coming to the house at all.

To this there succeeded a sense of alarm and of a peril I could not define. I thought that I was in a prison, and the Cossacks were my jailers. The fitful light upon the floor showed red and ghastly, and suggested the blood of dead comrades. I started up, pressing my hands to my eyes and prepared for any ignominy, when, as in a flash, the whole scene was recalled, and I remembered both the room and the Poles. At the same instant the fire, leaping into flame, showed me the figure of Valerie, and I could have sworn that she was about to quit the apartment. This was not so. She made a sign to me, and I perceived immediately that it was one which warned me to be silent.

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Naturally, all this astonished me very much, for I had expected to find her fast asleep. And yet here she was, sword in hand, standing by the door as though an enemy had knocked upon it. Stepping over the sleeping figures of Bardot and my nephew, I asked her in a whisper what had happened.

"The Pole has not returned," she said. "I heard a sound of footsteps on the snow—many of them. We must lock the door; there is danger."

With this she swung over the great bar of iron, and it fell softly into its place. If I had any doubt of the wisdom of what she did, a quick glance about the apartment would have set it at rest. Neither the old woman herself nor the younger son were where they had been last night. Moreover, a sound of footsteps was now audible beyond all question. It was evident that the house was surrounded and that these cunning people had betrayed us.

A kick from my foot woke old Bardot, and Léon started up directly the sergeant moved. The briefest words told them what had happened; and, still yawning, they stretched out their hands and felt in the straw for their swords. Our muskets had been piled up in the corner with those of the young men, but it

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was soon apparent that they had been pillaged while we slept, for a purpose we could readily imagine. We had only the pistols, of which no occasion robbed us, and our first care was to prime them before going to the window. It was well that we did so. Hardly had Bardot thrown open the casement when bullets hailed into the room, and the china came crashing down like slates from a penthouse when the wind is high. This was a pretty business, to be sure—the last kind of welcome we had expected when we fell asleep by the fire.

“To the door!” cried I, as the shots rang out. We all were down on our marrow bones in a twinkling, protected by the great wooden doors and the bolt we had drawn. It was plain to me that no bullet would pierce the wood of the door, and that those who were after us must come in by the windows. The greater mystery remained—who were the bandits who attacked us in this headlong way, and what was their number? That they were not Cossacks I felt sure, for soldiers would have known how to take us in our sleep, and the rest had been easy. Were they the wretched moujiks, so many of whom armed themselves against the wounded of the Grand Army when it fled from Russia? Or

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were they the real bandits of the steppes? We answered the question when a bearded brigand, waving a gardener's hoe, appeared at the window and slashed at us with the gleaming steel. This man I shot dead directly he showed his face. It was evident that he was but a peasant after all, and that we had his fellows to deal with.

I say that I shot him dead; but the respite was brief enough. No sooner had the man fallen than his place was taken by others, all armed with the most barbarous weapons, but no less zealous for our blood. Under any other circumstance the scene must have been droll enough. Here were we four with our backs to the great door, the latticed windows, by which the assassins tried to enter, upon either side of us. Frightened by the death of their comrade, they now resorted to a primitive attempt to harpoon us, as though we had been so many fish in a sea. It was ridiculous to watch the hairy arms thrust in at the window, while scythes or pikes or bayonets on sticks were turned menacingly toward us and their owners bayed like dogs after quarry.

Happily, our position enabled us to treat this puny assault with derision. We were beyond the reach of their harpoons, and we neglected no opportunity to retaliate. More

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than one of the assassins lost his hand or his arm by a swift cut from the swords we knew so well how to use. This was satisfactory enough, but it carried us nowhere, and behind it all there lay the real apprehension that these monsters would force the window presently and butcher us as though we had been sheep. Hundreds of our comrades had so perished since we left Krasnoë. Wild creatures, more like gorillas than men, had come out of the woods with their scythes roped to sticks and had slashed and maimed the wounded without grace or pity. And here we were dealing with the same kind of villains, but, happily, neither wounded nor frightened by them. If any secret anxiety had accompanied the first moments of this amazing encounter, it was for little Joan d'Izambert, who still lay upon the far side of the room and had been forbidden by me to join us. I saw that the heavy table protected her from bullets, and bidding her lie still, I turned my attention to the window. It was time truly. Someone had now pushed a musket through the casement, and, aiming at hazard, the roar of the discharge shook everything in the apartment. This was the turn we had not anticipated. It needed all our wits now to slash at the barrels as they were poised by unseen hands,

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and nothing but the greatest agility saved our lives at such a crisis.

This was all very well, but you will soon see that it could not continue. Four of us there were to slash at the guns, but many outside to direct them; and presently my poor friend Bardot uttered a low cry and fell in the straw at my side.

"I am done for," said he, and instantly he fainted.

The success redoubled the fury of those without. Heads were seen at the window again; there was a new and more savage onslaught with the pikes; the door itself began to tremble under the thud of axes. I believed then that we were done for, and I am sure that the others were of my opinion. Let the door fall, and we should be cut to pieces. No hope of plunder animated these savages, but that insensate hatred of the invader by which our poor fellows had suffered so much already. They lusted for our blood, and that alone would satisfy them.

Surely this was a very terrible moment. The blows of the axes seemed to number the moments we had to live. Convinced now that they would not get us by the windows, but that the door must be forced, the wretches had drawn off and concentrated all their fury

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upon these ancient beams. Happily for us, the man who built the house was himself a child of the wilderness, and his life, no less than ours, may have depended many a time upon the stoutness of his portals. The door withstood the attack, though the very walls shook with the fury of it. We could do nothing but crouch there and wait, hope almost dead, the promise of the day but a mockery. When to this we heard a cry of "Fire!"—for that was a word every French soldier had learned in Moscow—then we understood and believed that it was the end. They were going to burn us out. The cries of the old woman whose house they would have fired moved them not at all. "Fire!" they yelled; and we could hear them running hither and thither—a savage horde mad in its lust for blood.

We had uttered few words until this time; and, as for that, a man could hardly have heard himself speak in the room. Now, however, we knew an instant of respite, and it was then that Valerie proposed that we should open the doors.

"Anything is better than this," she said. "Courage may find the horses—who knows?"

The suggestion was wise, and I fell in with it readily.

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“ Let Léon go first and do you follow him,” said I. “ The child shall come with me.”

And at that I stooped over my poor Bardot and perceived that he was indeed dead. The prospect of dying out there in the open was less horrible than that of being cooped up in this miserable house, which presently must become a furnace; and who could say what these wretches might do or not do when confronted by soldiers of the Guard? The resolution hardly was taken when we lifted the bolt and threw the great doors wide open. “ En avant ! ” cries Léon, rushing out with his sword flashing. Then he laughed drolly. Not a moujik was to be seen; not a voice to be heard. A sound of approaching sleigh bells alone broke in upon the silence of the night.

IV

WELL, we all stood there to listen—our swords in our hands, our ears bent. A miracle had happened, and our enemies were fled. None of us, if it were not the child, understood the reality of the peril we had escaped, or surrendered to that revulsion of feeling natural to the circumstance. Little Joan, however, shed childish tears and was upon her knees

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giving thanks in an instant. The rest of us looked at her somewhat ashamed; our faith remained shaken. Beyond that, old Bardot was dead. I think we remembered the fact even when our own delivery tempted us to rejoice.

But was it delivery?

I have told you that the sound of twinkling sleigh-bells arrested our attention. Minute by minute they grew louder; we heard the thud of hoofs upon the snow, and presently we discerned a troop of horsemen approaching at a trot, and amidst them a sleigh of unusual size drawn by no fewer than four horses abreast. This unexpected company made straight for the house, and drew rein only at its door. Who they were, or what country, whether friend or enemies, the wan light forbade us to say. Their master evidently rode in the sleigh, and no sooner had it pulled up than he sprang out upon the snow and in a twinkling was doffing his hat to Valerie St. Antoine. Such a merry old gentleman I had not met in Russia. Verily he did not cease to smile from the moment his troop first surrounded us until that other moment, less pleasing, when we were trussed like fowls and thrust headlong into other sleighs which followed in his wake.

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Surely this was the most surprising adventure we had yet experienced in Russia.

Here was a merry old gentleman who knew nothing of us, but whose mere presence had scattered the moujiks like chaff; here was he riding up to the wretched house; clapping eyes upon Valerie and the child; hustling them headlong into his own sleigh; nodding to his troopers to fall upon us and carrying us away as though we were so many sheep for the block. Never have I known such a surprise. I could have laughed aloud at the irony of it when my nephew and I found ourselves upon our backs in a wretched coracle and heard the crack of the whips which hurried us on to a Russian prison. Assuredly there could be no other destination. We admitted as much to each other without any preface at all.

“They will be the Polish lancers from Orcha,” said Léon. “I suppose the old man is one of their princes. Devilish unlucky, upon my word, mon oncle; we had done better with the peasants.”

I told him that it was possible. The same thought was in both our minds. What of Valerie and the child? That the old man had been bewitched by Valerie's beauty there was no doubt whatever. Every gesture, every look

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marked him as a libertine from the moment when he first clapped eyes upon her until he had dragged her into his sledge and the horses had gone off at a gallop. Léon knew this as well as I, and his anger was a dreadful thing to see.

“I will shoot him like a dog, so help me God!” he said. And he strained with the strength of an ox to burst the ropes which bound him.

He might as well have tried to break a tree asunder. We were bound hand and foot, as though we had been the meanest of criminals. Our escort was a troop of some eighty men armed with lances and muskets, and plainly showing that they had their orders. There remained but the idle speculation upon that which must come after. Would this old man butcher us, fearing our tongues, or would he hand us over to the Cossacks at the first station we came to? We could not tell; the humiliation of our defeat was beyond all words insupportable, and our wrists bled with our efforts to free them. Valerie was in this man’s power, and she had but us to look to. I could not have suffered more had my own sister’s honour been at stake.

“The opportunity is not here,” said I to Léon; “but it may come. Words will not

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help us. Take my advice and feign submission; it is better than being butchered. We shall not help Valerie that way. Let us remember what we have to do, and not act like children."

His answer was a frenzied outburst of rage which appalled me. So loud was it that the escort derided him, and the driver slashed back at him with his whip. When it had passed I perceived the old Léon, whose wit was quick even under such an emergency. He lay back upon the boards of the sleigh and feigned sleep.

Day was breaking then, and a dim sun seeking to shine. The country itself was the same God-forsaken wilderness that we had trod these many days. No man at the heart of the ocean could have discerned an horizon more hopeless. Everywhere the snow and the whitened pines and the ultimate desolation. Man seemed to have fled the wretched farms we passed. Once upon the horizon we saw a troop of horsemen, but they disappeared from our view immediately. It was not until night-fall approached that we came without warning upon an unspeakable village, and this grim procession halted.

Here we saw the merry old gentleman's sleigh again, but it was now empty and

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obviously being driven to a stable. We ourselves, lifted by brawny arms, were hurled headlong into the cellar of a filthy inn, and there unbound and left for many hours in darkness. When the door next was opened the sergeant of the troop appeared carrying a lantern and a mess of mutton and potatoes. To our astonishment he greeted us in the German tongue, and seemed to have come upon a mission of reconciliation. Speaking in his master's name he apologised for what had happened to us.

“His Excellency regrets that you have been treated with so little ceremony,” he said; “but, *meine Herren*, he has suffered much at the hands of your countrymen, and is in no mood for civilities. You were lucky to find him in a good humour. Give me your parole that you will make no attempt to escape, and he will carry you to Elbing and leave it with the general in command there to say what shall be done with you. Otherwise, I fear that you will not go to Elbing at all.” And he looked at us as one who shall say, “In that case he will deal with you here and now.”

“As his Excellency pleases,” said I. “If he prefers the Russians at Elbing to settle this affair, we are in his hands. But let him know that I am a surgeon upon His Majesty's

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staff, and that my nephew here is of the Guard. I think your master will be wise to remember that when the time comes."

The fellow said that our message should be delivered, and leaving the light with us, he withdrew and bolted the trap of the cellar behind him. His intimation that we were to go to Elbing seemed odd, and I could make little of it, nor Léon for that matter.

"With any luck we should find the marshal and the rear-guard there," said I. "On the other hand, if there has been an action and the Russians have taken Elbing, God help us. The old man must have heard something of the kind, or he would never be going there. What do you make of it, nephew? Was I wise to give him the parole, or should we have held our tongues?"

Léon was altogether at a loss

"I am thinking of Valerie," said he. "Good God, what a thing to happen! All this would have been very different if we had remained with the army, mon oncle. Undoubtedly there has been a battle and Marshal Ney has been beaten. We shall find the Cossacks in Elbing, and God help us, as you say!"

Then he added very solemnly, "There is only one thing to hope, that I may yet meet this merry old gentleman. Let him look to

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himself if I do, for by the God above me I will kill him like a sheep."

The woman dictated his frenzy, and who could wonder? For myself, I had an extraordinary confidence in the wit of Valerie St. Antoine and was ready to match it against that of any old dotard in Russia. At the same time it was impossible to forget her situation—here in this cursed wilderness, alone amid a troop of savages and with no prospect at the far end of it but that of an unnameable submission. Naturally I said nothing of this to my nephew, nor encouraged his wild notion that we might escape from the cellar. They had caught us in the trap, and nothing but a miracle could get us out. Beyond that we had given our paroles, and well done or ill, the attempt to break them at such an hour would have been madness. So we slept upon it, and were awakened at dawn to be told that the sledges were ready.

We found a fine sunny morning and a dingy street full of gaping moujiks. Of the merry old gentleman, however, we heard nothing; nor had we any word from Valerie or the child. Our own escort was as it had been yesterday, a troop of Lithuanians well clad and armed, and apparently immune to the severities of the weather. Satisfied with our parole, they

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indicated our places in the sledge and made no attempt to bind us, and presently we all set out with a rattle of accoutrements and a tinkle of bells which would have been pleasant music had the circumstances permitted.

Soon it was plain that we were not very distant from the sea, and we travelled all that day towards the south-east as I judged. When night fell the spires of Elbing came to view upon the horizon, and a little after dusk we drew near to the city.

“And now,” said I to Léon, “we shall know.”

I did not add that it seemed a thousand chances to one against any hope of our ever seeing the French frontier again.

V

It was nearly ten o'clock at night when we entered the city. There were few people in its streets, and save some German hussars and a troop of dragoons, whose uniform was unknown to me, I saw no troops. The hope that the remnant of the Grand Army had marched in was, therefore, shattered.

It may have been that we had come after our comrades had left. This was a very un-

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pleasant supposition, which I feared to speak of, though Léon was quick to remember it.

“The fellows appear to have been speaking the truth,” said he gloomily, as he looked at the silent house and wondered, I doubt not, which of them sheltered Valerie. “The marshal has been beaten, and we shall see no more Frenchmen in Elbing, mon oncle. What then? What are they going to do with us?”

I confessed my inability to answer. The Poles were our allies, and it was inconceivable that we should suffer a mischief at their hands. Nevertheless, these were strange times, and God knows how little any man could be relied upon where French soldiers were concerned. If we had not misjudged the merry old gentleman our presence in Elbing could not but be inconvenient to him. I perceived this immediately, though I forbore to speak of it.

“We must carry it with a high hand,” said I; “nothing will be done here by submission. Remember that we are of His Majesty’s Guard, and let us take insults from no man quietly.”

Léon smiled in his old way.

“To do you justice, mon oncle,” said he, “that is not your habit.”

The words were hardly spoken when the sledge stopped, and looking up, I saw the

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gates of the prison frowning upon us. So this was our merry friend's hospitality ! Even my nephew perceived the drift of it now.

"The old rascal will trump up some charge against us and keep us out of the way," said he. "By God, mon oncle, this is too much ! Parole or no parole, I mean to make a run for it."

I dissuaded him, pointing out the folly of it in the presence of the escort.

"Do not give them the satisfaction of shooting you," said I. "We have money with us, and will make ourselves heard. This is neither the place nor the time."

And so saying, I stepped out of the sledge and followed the captain of the hussars into the courtyard of the prison. Truly was it a remarkable predicament for two of the Guard to be in.

This scene will always remain in my memory. Even to-day I can recall every detail of it, the square courtyard, the guard-room upon the left-hand side, the inner gate with its portcullis and the gloomy buildings of the prison beyond. The astonishing thing was that we seemed to be expected, and all preparations were made to receive us. No sooner were we brought in and the gates shut than they conducted us to the guard-room and

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there brought us before a young captain of the garrison, who immediately made known the alleged reason of our arrest.

“You are accused of rendering help to the Emperor’s enemies and of robbing French soldiers in this vicinity,” said he. “The information is laid by Herrn Immo von Gustorf, the prefect of this city. The court will try you as soon as it can be constituted. Meanwhile I am to hold you here as prisoners.”

It was an amazing declaration, and even the young man seemed surprised when he looked at us. A soldier does not require to be told that another is of the same profession, and the young captain must already have perceived our condition. When upon this came my heated protest, and Léon’s fiery threats, I could see that suspicion gave place to an apprehension which was very real.

“Herr Captain,” said I, “your charge is preposterous. We wear His Majesty’s uniform, and such crimes as you name are beneath us. Let me warn you very seriously of the consequences of that which you are about to do. His Majesty is careful of the reputation of his Guard, and he will know how to deal with such an outrage as this.”

The threat moved him not at all. He declared that he but did his duty.

“If you are innocent, gentlemen,” said he, “you can prove it to the court. My duty is to keep you here until you are tried. I may say, however, that if I can be of service to you in other ways, you have only to command me. This is not a house of hospitalities, but such as I can procure shall be offered to you.”

To this I answered civilly that we were very much obliged to him, and bidding Léon hold his tongue, I said that we should remember any service of the kind when the French rode in—upon which I looked at him closely to see what he would make of it. When he did not contradict me, then I knew that the story of Marshal Ney’s defeat was a lie, and for the first time since we had met the merry old gentleman I began to hope.

The young captain, meanwhile, had caught up a lantern and set out to cross the yard. We followed him to a tower on the eastern side, where in a considerable apartment upon the first floor he told us that we must be prepared to spend the night.

“I will send you what supper I can,” said he. “Food is not readily to be had in Elbing; there has been no bread for three days. None the less, I will do what I can, messieurs.” And setting the lantern upon the table, he com-

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manded the sergeant to have beds made ready for us.

When he was gone and the door bolted, we began to examine the apartment with the eager eyes of men who did not submit to adversity readily. Would our wits get us out of this cursed hole, or must we suffer the tragic farce to the end? Alas, it was soon evident that any hope of escape was out of the question. Not only were the windows grilled heavily with iron, but they looked upon a moat, whose further wall must have been thirty feet high, while beyond it stood a rampart patrolled by sentries. The door itself should have withstood artillery. We could dare nothing here, and we sat down in the dim light to remember that Valerie St. Antoine and Joan d'Izambert were still the "guests" of the villain who had entrapped us.

"There is only one chance," says Léon; "we are lost if the army does not come in."

I knew it to be true; but even if it were so, what then? Would our comrades learn of our pitiable condition? I could hardly believe it, and my heart sank low. Odd that we had marched so many thousands of leagues and had lived through the terrible days to come to such a judgment as this.

VI

THEY brought us a supper of mutton and rice and a bottle of gin about the hour of ten o'clock, and then they spread our beds upon the bare stone floor. These were of heavy blankets with a rude mattress beneath them. But they were beds for all that, and under any other circumstances they would have been a luxury. This night, however, we regarded them with indifference. Our brains were fired and our ears awake. Who would have slept under circumstances so tragic ?

Perchance the impotence of our condition added to its bitterness. If we could have struck a blow in the cause ; have buckled on our swords and gone out to deal with the merry old gentleman and his satellites, it would have been different : but to sit in that gloomy room, to hear the city's bells numbering the hours, to count the footsteps of the sentries and to pray for dawn—that was a torture beyond compare.

Not a mouthful of food had Léon eaten that day, nor could I persuade him to touch the mess they offered us. He spoke of Valerie always, delighting to remind me of the day when he had first seen her in Prince Nicholas's palace ; or of that night when she had saved

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us at the tower, and of her courage during the dreadful days—indeed, of a thousand things which a lover had seen but older eyes had missed. To all of which I could but answer indifferently.

“She is clever,” I would say. “She will know how to deal with your merry old gentleman.” When he asked if *we* knew how to deal with him, there was nothing more to be said. The grim walls of the prison answered him; the chime of the distant bells was an irony.

So the night sped on. For an hour, I think about twelve o’clock, I flung myself upon the wretched bed and slept fitfully. My head was in a whirl, and vain dreams tormented me. At one time I thought that we had leapt down into the moat and that the icy water choked us. At another I was riding proudly into Elbing at the head of the Vélites. Upon this there came the voice of many crying “Vive l’Empereur!” and “Vive la France!” I heard a great rolling of drums and the welcome blare of trumpets. This roused me thoroughly, and sitting up I saw that Léon was standing at the window and that the dream indeed had come true.

“Good God!” cried I. “What is it? What do you hear, Léon?”

He answered me, still standing there.

"The French are in the city, mon oncle. Listen to that!"

His voice echoed a triumph which thrilled me. Instantly I was at his side listening to the familiar sounds. Never did the roll of a drum fall so pleasantly upon a man's ear.

"We are saved," said I, though heaven knows the hope of it was still but a dream.

VII

WELL, we stood there for a full hour, speculating upon what we should do to get the news to our comrades. Certainly we might have bribed the jailers if any had come to the tower. Not a sound, however, disturbed the serenity of the prison. Our attempt to attract the attention of the sentries by smashing the lantern against the glass of the windows ended but in ignominious derision. The fellows never noticed us, and another hour must have passed before the door of the cell was opened and the young captain entered. I perceived immediately that he had come to tell us the news. His manner was obsequious to the point of ridicule.

"Messieurs," he said, "I am to take you immediately to the prefect's house."

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Upon which he uttered a word of command and a dozen men with lanterns appeared upon the narrow staircase.

It was a new turn and we knew not what to make of it. Evidently the merry old gentleman desired still to have us in his power, and the prospect of finding ourselves alone with him was far from reassuring. So much the young captain perceived and hastened to remove our apprehensions.

“Messieurs,” he said, “you have nothing to fear. The prefect has discovered his mistake and is anxious to apologise. You will be wise to take advantage of so favourable an opportunity. As for myself, I have done my duty. You will remember that when you make a report of this affair to his Excellency the marshal.”

We promised that we would do so. It was evident, upon reflection, that no mischief could come to us now that the French were in the city, and curiosity alone would have sent us to the prefect’s house.

The latter proved to be hardly a stone’s throw from the prison walls. We were driven there in the same sledge which had carried us to Elbing, and, being arrived at the *conciergerie*, were immediately admitted and conducted into a spacious hall, blazing with lights

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and superb in the richness of its decoration. Here, to our astonishment, Valerie herself received us.

I will not dwell upon the manner of her meeting with Léon, nor upon the amazement with which I beheld her in this situation. No magic of wonderland could have wrought such a change in men's condition as we then experienced when they carried us from the gloom of the prison to this princely mansion.

"Where is his Excellency the prefect?" I asked her when we had embraced for the twentieth time.

She told me in a word.

"Many miles from Elbing," says she. "I am mistress here. I have told him he must not be found in the city while the French are here."

"Good God," cried I, "what a turn about!"

Miraculous indeed it was that so young a girl had won so astonishing a victory. The coming of the French saved her and us. There was not a more frightened man in Prussia than the prefect, who fled directly French bugles blared at the gates. So much Valerie told us while she led us in and showed us the banquet she had prepared for us.

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VIII

WE lived gallantly at the prefect's expense during the days we spent in Elbing. They were happy days, and yet what regrets attended them! Of all the six hundred thousand who had set out so bravely from Moscow but a few short months ago, there were but twenty-two thousand of us, soldiers of the line and of the Guard—worn, weary, and ragged men—who survived to reach that haven.

Never shall I forget that last review when the marshal himself rode up and down our battered ranks and told us that our troubles were at an end. Henceforth we were to be carried in sledges to the French frontier and our homes. The day of battle was over; the night of our sorry victory had been won.

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